

14 DAYS

♥ TO LOVE YOU ♥

VACATIONS ARE MEANT TO BE FUN,
NOT CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

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1

"I love you," he said, a shuddered breath in the timid evening air. Once unnerving green eyes; sharper than glass and hotter than molten iron, now trembled with uncertainty unbecoming of the typically poised bastard.

I forced a laugh, one that made him rigid, and replied, "That's an odd joke, even for you."

Beneath the wooden archway overgrown with gnarled ivy and surrounded by fragrant flowers from roses to lilies to sunflowers, Beau invaded more than my space. He shattered the confinements of my mind, crumbling barriers that once stood tall. The soft click of his sneakers against stone rumbled in my ringing ears.

Here, in a garden of cold gray fountains and sleeping flowers, Beau spoke with bated breath as if to ensnare me with words alone, "It's not a joke. This isn't a joke, Devin."

He kissed me.

I wondered then how the hell so much changed in only 13 days.

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"Devin, I swear if you are not ready within the next five minutes, I am going to make you sit in the hotel room without TV for the next two weeks!" Mom bellowed from the floor below, successfully kick starting my motor that ran out of gas mere seconds after she had woken me up for the tenth time.

"I'm ready, I'm ready!" That was the biggest of the bullshit lies though, so I shot out of bed like Satan himself was after me. In the case of my annoyed mother, she might as well be Satan.

My luggage wasn't even fully packed. I launched whatever I got my hands on into a suitcase and zipped it shut. The only items of real importance were my phone and charger anyways. Good thing I was sent into overdrive because Mom ascended the stairs in quick strides that signaled my possible upcoming doom.

My bedroom door flung open. She stood in the doorway, a little frazzled with her chestnut brown hair stuck up in a messy ponytail. She analyzed the room, taking in my smug ass sitting on a very full suitcase.

"You just threw random stuff in there, didn't you?" She accused.

"No."

She leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed and nose wrinkled.

"You said I had five minutes," I argued.

"Yes, now, but you knew about this trip months ago." She rubbed her temple. "Oh my god, how are you going to survive living in a college dorm? You barely take care of yourself when I'm nagging you."

"Hey!"

"Come on, throw your stuff in the van. Everyone is about ready to go." She left.

I followed after an initial smell check of clothes, haphazardly throwing on a loose top and basketball shorts. My frizz of brown hair was never tamable so a trusty baseball cap was always there to save the day. Not like I needed to dress up. We had at least an eleven hour drive. If I was gonna be stuck in a van for that long, I was going to be comfy as hell.

Luggage rested by the doorway downstairs for a two week long trip. Our family didn't have the cash to dish out for a vacation every year. The last time we did anything remotely expensive was six years ago, when I was twelve. We took a three day trip to an amusement park. I had a blast even if I threw up after the first day. I was determined to ride every damn thing.

Did I succeed? No, but I did my best, and I was a proud little boy with a very upset stomach.

The trip we were about to go on though was what my parents had been calling "The Big Adventure" for nearly a year. The plan was as followed; one week at Old Orchard Beach, Maine, then head down to Silver Sands, Connecticut, for three days and our final destination was Skyland Manor, New Jersey, which was a freaking castle!

Now, it wasn't a Queen of England type castle, but an older place built by some rich British dude (according to Mom) with all the fanciness of a castle. It was actually a wedding venue, but when Mom spotted it during her investigation on what else we could or should do, she insisted that we stay there, so that would be the last three days. Apparently, there was a huge garden, which was part of the estate and a lake nearby open to the public. I was more interested in the castle though because we all know what a castle has; secret passageways. And I was going to find one. It was my mission.

Our vacation was supposed to be a big deal, a sort of congratulations for graduating. Since I was accepted into college, also a parting gift for moving into the dorms soon. Wasn't sure how planning for all that early was the best idea; what if I got held back a year or didn't get accepted into college? Hmm? Who freaking knew with me, it could have happened. I had never been the sharpest tool in the shed, but whatever, I wasn't complaining...yet.

The trip would not be an issue; who else was going though, now *that* was an entirely different matter. In ways I couldn't even imagine at the time.

"Look who finally decided to show up," Dad teased when stepping inside to grab another of the suitcases. He cast me a warm smile, face slightly flushed from the exertion of carrying luggage back and forth.

"I've been up," I argued.

"Yeah, yeah. I heard you snoring upstairs."

"I don't snore!"

Dad snagged another suitcase, knocking his head to the side in a request to follow. I obliged after grabbing one of Mom's smaller bags. She had been packed for weeks, chattering about it almost nonstop, and sometimes crying when she thought I wasn't around to hear. Sure, this was a vacation, but it was also a reminder that, soon, I would be moving. I wish she didn't get so emotional about it (that way I didn't feel so emotional about it too.)

Our trip began on a humid summer morning with clear skies. No bad omen in sight. Sweat was already forming along my brow. Every breath was thick, as if breathing in a glass of water rather than air, which was in no way unusual for a Pennsylvanian summer. The promise of time spent on the shore near the cool ocean was the only reason I got out of the air conditioned house.

A black rental van was parked in the driveway. Everyone pitched in for the rather spacious seven seater seeing as it wasn't just Mom, Dad, and me going on the trip. Three others were waiting by the van dressed as casually as me, one of which I would have preferred not being stuck with for an hour, let alone two weeks though.

"Good morning, Devin!" Aunt Zoey called with an excited wave. Her short dirty blonde hair hugged full cheeks that were pink with a warm blush. Beside her was Uncle David, shimmering green eyes luminous even if it was only a little after 5am. They weren't actually my aunt and uncle, but Aunt Zoey and Mom were best friends since high school. They both met our Dad's in college and moved to the same street after marriage. Hell, they even got pregnant around the same time in hopes that their kids would be best friends too.

That definitely didn't happen.

"Morning," I responded, smiling at her and Uncle David. The last of the group I stepped around in order to stack luggage in the car, noting his exaggerated eye roll out of my peripheral.

Whatever, like he wanted me to say good morning, or would even do the same to me. Hypocritical jackass.

"I was thinking we could stop on the way out of town to grab something to eat," Mom suggested with her arms locked around Aunt Zoey. The two squealed like they were fangirls at their favorite pop concert. "Then we'll be on our way to the beach!"

"The beach!" Aunt Zoey clapped her hands. "Oh, we haven't been since before the boys were born, right?"

Uncle David nodded. "Last we went was right after we graduated college."

"That was so long ago. I wish I still had the body for a bikini."

I already knew what was coming and finally faced the last equally as uninterested face; Beau. Always the charmer with his textbook scowl or grimace. He had fair features and a pale complexion to match. The narrow eyes though, those were what really caught attention; the same brilliant green as his dad's but haunting as a horror house. In other words, he was super popular for merely existing, the dumb sack of shit.

A silver nose ring hugged his nostril when it twisted in annoyance long before Uncle David responded, "What are you talking about, honey? You still look amazing in everything!"

Our faces of disgust mirrored each other. This was one of the very few things we saw eye to eye on, neither of us were interested in our parents flirting. So it was no surprise we both rounded the van to the other side. Getting away from the folks was meant to be some sort of safety, but in all honesty, nothing was safe between Beau and me. We were a catastrophe waiting to happen, the calm before the storm.

He flung the door open, slipping in when I was about to. His shoulder knocked into my chest, brushing me rudely aside in the process.

"Jackass," I whispered.

Beau sank into the back seat with his cold stare piercing through the dim early sunlight. "I bet your bag wasn't even packed this morning," he taunted.

Thin lips curled into a smirk that would make the Joker jealous when I hesitated to bark back, "I hope you choke on your breakfast."

Beau hummed, uncaring of my dream to see his face turn blue and eyes bulge out of his skull before the demons of hell dragged his corpse to an eternity of pain. And that came from someone that didn't believe in hell!

But perhaps he shouldn't choke on his breakfast because then our vacation would be cancelled. I'd have to pretend to care through a funeral and even wear an uncomfortable penguin suit. As much as I hated the fucker, I didn't hate him enough to ruin this trip, or put in that kind of effort. He felt the same considering our agreement, which Beau reiterated when we both settled in the last row.

"Truce for the next two weeks. No pranks. No purposefully pissing the other off—"

"How can we tell if it's purposeful? Honestly, pissing you off is like breathing to me by this point."

"That, for example, is purposeful," he spoke through gritted teeth. The long tufts of his dirty blonde hair, slightly damp with sweat, were brushed back by his hand. "We agreed to play nice or have you changed your mind?"

"If either of us were to change their mind, it would be you," I accused. "Nice isn't exactly part of your vernacular."

"Spell that."

"I got one better. How about you spell *go fuck yourself*?"

Our eyes locked, a silent competition to see who would cop out first. Beau was good at that; maintaining an apathetic facade or playing the charming prince. What face was shown was determined by the audience. Once, in elementary school, he stared a girl down until she cried for stealing his favorite purple crayon. Fun times. Another instance in high school, he joked his way out of a detention. I was not as successful.

Inevitably, I was the cop out.

My hands raised in surrender. "Truce is still in place. Play nice and avoid each other at all costs. Besides, once this trip is over, there won't be much time left before we won't have to put up with each other anymore."

Because not only was I moving to the college dorms, but Beau was also going to a college out of state, close to a ten hour drive so I heard. We both knew that the most that would happen was a visit over break when our parents would see each other and insist we do as well, but that was that. No more multiple conjoined family dinners every week. No more game nights on Friday's. No more shared holidays. No more forced birthday invitations. No more bickering at school.

No more Beau Young.

Now *that* was something to truly look forward to.

"Boys, do you have everything?" Aunt Zoey's voice sliced through the tension. She peeked her head into the van. The fact that she was the mother of the piece of shit next to me was almost comical, if not kind of sad. Aunt Zoey was a breath of fresh air and Beau was a rancid pack of rotting meat. Their child was clearly switched at birth.

"Good to go, Aunt Zoey," I answered with a smile.

"Yeah, Mom," came Beau's quiet reply.

"They said they're good to go!" She giggled when taking a seat. Mom quickly joined. Our dad's were up front until the inevitable switch of driving duties hours later. The van revved to life. The door shut. The radio wasn't even turned on since the car was filled with chatter, well, at least from the front two rows.

Beau had a pair of headphones in, arms crossed and temple pressed to the window. When he caught my stare, the bridge of his nose wrinkled, eyes narrowed, and upper lip crept up into a snarl. Then he peered out the window as if he didn't somehow insult me with a single look.

That rotten son of a crack biscuit. He pissed me off; from the sound of his voice to the constant pissy nature of his bad attitude. Everything about Beau put me on the defensive, waiting to strike, such a contrast to our parents that get along so well. If one were to ask how that happened, I wouldn't be able to give a proper response.

Thinking back, there wasn't an exact moment where we decided, "*yeah, I fucking hate you.*" In fact, as a kid, I thought Beau was pretty. Pretty in the sense that he reminded me of the dolls my grandma had at her house, the ones in glass cases that she said I couldn't touch because they were expensive (I still ended up breaking two.) But then he grew up and became, whatever the hell he was. We were always around each other because our parents, and yet, we were drastically different.

Beau liked drawing in a corner or reading a book while I ran through the backyard, tracking mud and twigs into the house after a long day outside. He was quiet and I was loud. He didn't know what colors were while I looked like someone's rainbow acid trip. He hated sweets and I loved them. He was top of the class without much effort and I barely passed with the help of friends. Like night and day, but there were a few similarities that really dug that nail of hatred into us; pride, stubbornness, and competition.

We were both competitive as hell. Neither of us liked to back down. Neither of us wanted second place, so when there was a chance to prove ourselves above the other, we went for it. We battled over video games, outplayed each other on game night with the folks, purposefully took opposing sides for any class debates even if we didn't agree with what we were arguing about. If we could make it into a competition then we would.

However, a truce had been set that came down to two simple rules; play nice and avoid each other at all costs. We had to survive for 14 days, a challenge that would test us in ways we never could have fathomed.

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Story Status: Complete.

Hi, please do not refer to my characters as sex positions; top, bottom, uke, seme etc. They have names. Use them. They aren't toys ^_^ Please respect my request here and on my other stories, thank you.

Fun fact; their trip is based off the one I took last year. I'll share some pictures in the author note so you can have actual visuals of where they're going. Anyways, here we are, the beginning of 14 days! What do you guys think of Beau and Devin thus far? What kind of shenanigans will our boys get up to on their vacation? How the hell are we going to get to a confession?! I hope you guys like this story because I certainly loved writing it!

2

We had been on the road for six hours when Dad said the dreaded words, "We're lost."

I removed my headphones to listen to the catastrophe about to unfold.

Mom gaped at Dad's sheepish grin. "What do you mean we're lost? There's a GPS on your phone."

"Uh, I was using this actually—" He held up an atlas, which was not a good idea.

"You weren't using the GPS?!"

"I thought we agreed to sight see, I was avoiding the toll roads."

"There's an option on your phone to avoid toll roads."

"I know that, but it still didn't take us past anything we wanted to see, like here—" Dad waved to the small town we were currently meandering our way through. The thin streets were surprisingly crowded with cars parked on the edges. The speed limit was pretty damn slow. Being so far from home, Dad was obeying the law to the T.

"We wouldn't have come here if we listened to the GPS," Dad reiterated in hopes to save himself from Mom's growing wrath.

"He's right, Chelsea," said Aunt Zoey with a comforting smile. "Besides, it's lunch time. The boys are probably hungry. Let's stop somewhere to eat and we'll look over the GPS and the map."

Always the one with a plan. I guess I understood where Beau got his smarts from, but only that. The rest of him was shit. Dad's plan wasn't though, shit I mean, seeing as the scenic route from our southern corner of PA to Maine was much better than expected.

Typically PA scenery consisted of two things, depending on whether you were close to the Appalachian mountains or not. There was either an ocean of rolling hills or cow pastures for days. Scratch that, there were cow pastures for days either way. We even had one next to our high school. No one ever really got used to the smell.

In our case though, we were purposefully making detours through small towns that would have been booming back in the day. Stone and brick houses were huddled together. Shops sat side by side with old striped awnings and iron lamp posts stood tall. Trees lined the road, sitting in their own square cut outs from the sidewalks. Said sidewalks were thin, some made of red brick faded with age. Old shops, possibly even passed down from generation to generation, still ran while appearing to have the original moldings and signage. Some shops were discolored while others were likely refurbished. But the towns were actually fascinating, as if we were thrown into the past.

Uncle David spotted a family owned diner (or so the sign claimed) with iron patio furniture and wide glass windows revealing a dark brick interior and delicious looking pork sandwiches. After the van was parked, we found ourselves seated at a place called Marriner's Grill that smelled strongly of barbeque sauce and grilled meat. I was salivating the moment we got out of the van.

There was one seemingly not as starving as the rest of us though. My icy counterpart was MIA. The seat he once occupied was vacant. Aunt Zoey, as if she freakishly read my mind, called out, "Beau, don't go too far! We're going to order in a minute!"

"Ok!"

I took a chance to peek around Aunt Zoey, raising a confused brow at the sight of Beau kneeling down the street with a giant ass camera. I couldn't deny that it was odd to see the soft smile playing on his damn near permanently scowling lips. He normally had two settings; resting bitch face and actual bitch face. Right then though, he was neither.

Slowly, he observed the town through the lens, steady hands snapping pictures of the scenery. That shouldn't have been surprising though. He was in the yearbook club since middle school and was about to attend college to get a Bachelor of Arts with a focus in photography. Really had no idea what that all entailed, like, what the hell kind of classes would he have? Never asked since I was more focused on the *"living in the dorms that were about 10 hours away"* portion, y'know, the important bit.

I smiled at the thought.

Like Aunt Zoey warned though, the server returned to receive our orders. Beau wasn't paying us any mind, but he always got the same damn thing. He had the taste palette of a child. So when the server got to me, I ordered for us because that bitch wasn't making me wait for food.

Beau eventually graced us with his presence after the server at least got our drinks. He happily chugged half his pop in a single gulp. When our orders were brought out not long afterwards, it was only then that he put the pieces together; he never ordered, except the chicken salad with no tomatoes and italian dressing on the side was sitting in front of him anyways.

"Thanks, Mom," he said, earning a confused stare.

"Huh?"

"Ordering for me."

Aunt Zoey pointed to the boy with half a pulled pork sandwich already in his mouth; hi, that was me, and said, "Devin ordered for you, sweetie."

Beau glared then grimaced. I wasn't certain if it had to do with my stuffed cheeks and dirty mouth of barbeque sauce or the fact that I correctly ordered his meal.

I was quick to explain, "Don't act shocked. You always get some stupid chicken salad."

Although I didn't get why. Who the hell ate that little? I would be starving in less than thirty minutes! And it wasn't like Beau was a small guy. Sure, I had about four inches on him height wise (which he continued to argue would change one day), but the dude had shoulders for days and ran every damn morning. I would know because we ran together. Why? Because we lived on the same street and he refused to take another route and I sure as hell wasn't giving up mine. I had it first! So we ran together, bickering all the while.

"Even your taste in food is disappointing," I added with a few fries sticking out of my mouth.

"You like chicken salads."

"Sometimes, not always, besides, we're on vacation." I waved a few fries in the direction of his scrunched up face. "You pig out on vacation. It's a rule."

"Whose rule?"

"Everybody's rule."

Beau rested an elbow on the table, head atop his hand with a bored stare. "You're a dumb ass."

"At least I'm going to be a full dumb ass." My eyes squinted when he smirked. "That didn't sound as taunting after I said it."

"You had to say it to figure that out?"

There were times where I contemplated murder in my life. I could say with absolute confidence that 99% of those times had to do with Beau. The other 1% were my so-called friends that had teased me the last few months of the school year about the upcoming vacation and whether or not I would be dead or in jail by the end of it (for murdering Beau or being murdered by Beau, either was an understandable outcome.)

The good thing about being with our parents though was that we didn't have to interact so much. They kept talking, dragging us in from time to time but

direct communication was little. I made sure to catch Beau's gaze when I took the next bite from my sandwich though. He crunched his salad happily between his teeth in retaliation. I think Dad shook his head at us, but that was about it. They were used to our antics by that point.

"I bet the salad would be better with fries," I mentioned.

"Why? Getting full, dumb ass?"

I would have thrown a fry at him, but that would have been an insult to fries everywhere.

We ate the remainder of our meal in silence. Beau scurried off to take more photographs afterwards while our parents went over the route. Once I caught the camera pointed my way. Beau's green gaze locked with mine, peering over the device with a distant stare. I eagerly flipped him off. He still snapped the picture.

Twenty minutes later, we were back on the road.

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My headphones broke.

Damn it.

My headphones broke?!

The once perfectly functioning headphones were silent. I hastily maneuvered the wires. Sound sputtered out then stopped then fizzled then went quiet.

With five hours left of the car ride, I needed headphones. We ended up getting lost, *again*, so the once eleven hour car trip turned into one that would last about sixteen. My phone died ages ago and the extra charge was running low. Beau wasn't much different based on how he, too, brought out his charger a while back. Unlike me though, his headphones were functioning.

I decided to attempt and sleep it out, which lasted all of five minutes before our parents were singing along terribly to an oldie that I didn't know. Now I wasn't one to rag on older songs, but I didn't join in seeing as I had no idea what it was. If ya couldn't sing along then why bother suffering through the many off pitch wails of thy mother and father? Exactly, there was no reason.

Sleep was out of the equation. My headphones were out of the equation. Sitting there doing nothing for the next five hours was definitely out of the equation. There was only one option; I had to dive into the depths of hell in hopes to find my savior.

Said hellish savior sat silently. Our parents purchased those headrest mounts so we wouldn't have to hold our phones the whole ride. Beau was leaning comfortably, elbow on the edge of the window to prop his head up while some video played.

Tapping his arm, I wasn't the least surprised to meet his quizzical stare.

"What?" he hissed, popping out an earphone.

Eying the phone screen, I asked, "What are you watching?"

"None of your business."

So annoying. Why did he make everything so damn complicated?!

"My headphones broke." I held up said headphones, swaying them from side to side. "I don't have spares."

"Sucks for you." He popped his headphone back in only for me to rip it out. "Fuck off, Devin."

"You can spare a headphone. Let me watch TV with you. We got five hours left," I hissed, already scooting closer to him. If we weren't squished in the back seat, I imagine he would have kicked me for daring to saddle up next to him. Hey, I wasn't too keen on it either! But headphones weren't exactly made for distance.

"Suffer on your own," he snarled, attempting to steal back the missing earpiece. I refused, holding it tightly in my fist.

"Share or neither of us will have headphones."

Beau's reluctance faded with the threat of being equally as bored and tormented. He flinched when Aunt Zoey hit a high note that resembled burning rubber out of a parking lot.

That didn't mean we didn't glare at each other for at least five minutes prior to his giving in. No form of agreement was verbally given. He fell back into place, smacking thin lips together in obvious annoyance.

The show didn't turn out to be what was expected, especially considering Beau's lackluster facial expression. He was watching Game Grumps for fuck's sake, but was wearing the same expression my Grandpa had when brainlessly watching nature documentaries. I, on the other hand, appreciated the chatty duo and snickered along. Beau didn't much care for that judging on the sudden squirming. He angled his body away, but there wasn't exactly a lot of space back here.

Normally, I would bark at him about acting like I had a disease, but we had a truce. I leaned back with my knees pressed into the seat in front of us. The videos went on, neither of us saying a word as we sat side by side.

Beau was warm, or I guess we both were from the close proximity. Due to where I sat, for once, I had to peer up at him. It was surprising that I actually caught a change in facial expression; the slightest smirk played on his lips after a funny comment and sometimes he (unconsciously, I think) twisted the ends of his fringe around his fingers. But then I realized I was staring and that was weird so I turned away.

The sun was beginning to set. Mom mentioned something about only having about two hours left. My eyes were heavy from the unusual warmth seeping from the usually cold guy next to me, along with the natural sway of the car and the fact that we got up at 5 am. My neck began to ache. My head constantly dropped forward in exhaustion until I forced myself awake.

Then there was something smooth against my cheek, guiding me. Sleep took me over when my head rested somewhere comfortably, relieving my aching neck. I wasn't sure what it was, but it was really warm and I curled closer to comforting heat.

If I had known Beau lended me a shoulder to rest on then, would I have pulled away?

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Unfortunately, my trip didn't involve stopping in a cute town, but we did get lost and turned our car ride into a 17 hour adventure. By adventure, I mean torture because my mom and grandma couldn't stop arguing. At least Beau and Devin had more fun than us! So what do you think of the relationship between our boys? They know a lot about each other, enough for Devin to easily order Beau a meal, and Beau lended Devin his shoulder to sleep on! Even if it was in secret~

3

I was brutally awakened by an unpleasant shove, but were there such things as pleasant shoves? Didn't know. Didn't care. All I cared about was the current shove.

"What the hell?" I groaned, my head having made painful contact with the seat in front of us. Beau was glowering as per usual.

"Get out," he ordered. Nimble fingers massaged his right shoulder for some reason. "We're here."

"Huh?"

Wide-eyed, I took in our surroundings, discovering that, yeah, we had arrived.

Our hotel was a L shaped building of pastel green siding and white molding. The hotel was two stories high with a small parking lot, a matching office building and an attached indoor pool. The surroundings weren't all that gave way to our arrival though; the scent and the sounds did too.

Dad claimed we were right on the beach. I suspected he was exaggerating. In truth, I thought we were a block away or even a five minute drive, but my ears were not deceiving me. I heard it; the ocean, waves crashing against the sand. Smelled it too, the salty scent of the water that I half expected to be a tad repulsive. Often the ocean was described as a fishy scent and those were never pleasant. This, however, was not unpleasant at all, somehow fresh and exhilarating instead, which may have had to do with the fact that I had never been to the ocean and thus was a little biased in my enthusiasm.

Aunt Zoey and Uncle David were getting the luggage out of the trunk. Both smiled when the door opened, spotting us in the back seat.

"What are you two doing?" she asked, nodding towards the edge of the hotel. There was an obvious break between our residency for the week and the hotel next door. "Get on out there and see the beach."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I practically teleported out of the van. The excitement drove me round the corner, spotting a wooden pier that led from asphalt to tan sand. There were mounds on either side of the walk way coated in green weeds. Beyond that was the sea; a deep, alluring blue against an equally dark sky so one could barely tell where the sea ended and the sky began.

My shoes were haphazardly kicked aside, left on the asphalt with my socks. The thought of a sandbox came to mind, would the beach be similar? I was about to discover.

I bolted off the walk way into warm sand that sunk beneath my feet. The beach was nothing like a sandbox. This sand was almost heavy. I couldn't stop squishing the grainy texture childishly between my toes. I leaned over to touch coarse sand, fingers grazing over pieces of twigs or sea shells mixed within. The lights of the town cast the beach in a warm glow. The full moon hung over small waves dancing across the shore. From left to right, the beach dragged on and on with a long, dark wooden pier nearby. A spray of cool water sprinkled against my cheeks from the ocean air that tasted of cold salt. Footprints littered the shore out to the water that called to me.

I was hesitant at first, imagining every shark movie I ever saw then taking that first step in. White foam and bubbles tickled my feet then my ankles then half way up my calves. Since it was night, that was as far as I went, admiring the translucent water and dark sand beneath, glistening under pale moonlight. It was a little cool so my toes grew cold. Goosebumps broke out across my skin along with slight shivers that didn't have me turning away. The sand sank even further when wet, but I stood among the sea for the first time and realized it was better than I ever imagined.

Click.

Behind me, Beau stood with a camera in hand. The light of the town illuminated his silhouette, a boy among the sand with a night sky backdrop.

"Did you just take a picture of me?" I asked.

"I took a picture of the ocean," he replied. His pant legs had been rolled up nearly to his knees with shoes nowhere in sight, likely left on the asphalt same as mine. The natural sea-breeze brushed the blonde fringe from his eyes, which were admiring the beach similarly to my own.

"Come on then," I said, gesturing for him to step closer, which didn't happen.

"What?"

"Get in."

"No. I have my cam—Devin!" Beau growled when I dragged him. His feet sloshed in the cool water, realizing quickly that struggling would only put his camera in more danger. Besides, the damn thing was on a strap around his neck anyways! Freaking worry wart.

"The water's cold," he grumbled yet captured another picture, which had me raising a brow.

"Did you just take a picture of our feet in the water?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Foot fetish?"

Beau rolled his eyes so hard I was fairly certain they were about to take a trip out of his skull to the Bahamas and back.

"This is our first time in the ocean," he easily argued with the signature nose curl, the one that stated he was willing to put up a fight to defend his reasoning.

Ok, that was sound reasoning and I got why...but whatever, it was still a lame picture.

"If I find this picture on some weird foot fetish site, I swea—"

"You check weird foot fetish sites?" he asks.

"I may have to start now that I'm aware of your kink. No shame though, bro. You do you."

"Devin."

"Yeah?"

"Shut the fuck up."

I smirked. A sort of sick warmth settled in my chest when Beau's eyes were on me; that narrowed look and the minute curl of his upper lip. After a snigger, my gaze returned to the water that reached into the horizon. An eternal blue drifted far as the eye could see, as if there was nothing but ocean from here until the end of eternity, which had somehow become a comforting thought.

Another click followed. Beau deemed this depth of the ocean not to be a danger to his beloved camera. He wandered off.

"Is the water cold?!" Mom hollered from behind, joining us a moment later to squeal. "Devin, aren't your toes cold?!"

"A little."

"Get out then or you'll catch a cold."

"I'm not going to stay out of the ocean when we came to be in the ocean."

"A sound argument," said Uncle David.

Our families were all there among the waves, admiring the dark horizon and clear water. Once the parents started getting romantic and cuddling, I

ducked out real quick to tag along with Beau down the shoreline. Somehow he had made it all the way to the pier, standing beneath the damp wood with his neck craned. I swear he was taking pictures of the strangest things, then again, pretty sure that was what made him a photographer. He just wanted to catch everything in his lens. That was a thing, right? Wasn't sure. My knowledge of photography was to turn on the camera, make sure the lens cap was off and click.

"Don't follow me," he ordered once I was near, which was dumb. Why would I follow his order?

"I do what I want."

"And you want to follow me?"

"I want to avoid our lovey-dovey parents."

Beau was admiring the recent photos when he spoke, "You could have gone the opposite way, or gone to the hotel."

"Why do that when I could annoy you?" I smiled when he flipped me off.

Not another word was spoken. We absentmindedly traveled the shore. Beau was always a few steps ahead. I childishly stepped in his footprints, like when I would follow my parent's tracks through fresh snow. Sometimes he caught this and raised a questioning brow but made no verbal remark. Once or twice he faced me for another picture that I didn't complain about because we were at the beach and I would request copies later. I even took a few with my own phone. They would pale in comparison to his, but whatever, I wanted some memories of my own.

That evening stood out for more reasons than one. A first visit to the beach and a rare occurrence of civility between two that were the exact opposite of civil. With Beau there tended to be two atmospheres, heated and tense. Even in silence there was one of the two; heated because an argument was about to ensue or tense because one had ended. That time though, there was neither, although we were poking fun moments ago. Maybe it was the beach, the fact that we were both appreciating the first sight of it, taking in

the view and the sounds and the new sensations beneath our bare feet. If anyone ever asked, I wouldn't admit that our walk was comforting nor comment on how we returned to the hotel side by side. It happened and that was that.

Our parents were at the hotel already, sitting on white lounge chairs that faced the beach just outside of the rooms. They had already cracked open some beers, were laughing over some college story it sounded like when Beau and I arrived.

"There they are, we were starting to think you got lost," Dad teased, smacking me playfully in the stomach. He swiped a card key from the small table between him and Mom. "Here. You guys are actually two doors down."

Beau and I must have caught the same two words seeing as we both said, "What?"

"You guys?" I added, holding the single card key of potential doom.

"Yeah, we got a double room for us and a single for you. It was cheaper," Mom explained like it was no big deal, although she was making it even worse! "You've shared a bed before."

"When we were, like, seven!"

"So?"

"So!" I didn't actually have an explanation other than; *I don't want to and I hate the fucker so obviously I don't want to share a bed!*

Beau wasn't helping either. The hope drained from his eyes. He looked like someone pissed in a glass and he only realized after taking a drink.

"Room 104." Aunt Zoey tossed the car keys. "Your bags are still in the car though because I ain't workin' extra on vacation."

Beau narrowly caught said keys, fumbling with them once seeing as he, too, was in shock. But there was no turning back and, because I was a sucker for

punishment, I asked, "Our plan is to be here a week, right?"

All nodded.

"Then we're heading to a beach down south and the castle afterwards, so two more hotels?"

More nods.

"Are Beau and I sharing a bed there too?"

Nods. All fucking nods.

Beau breathed quietly under his breath when he turned to walk away, "Damn it."

Well, there was something else we agreed on because he took the words right out of my mouth.

There was no discussion between the van and the room. Pretty sure neither of us even acknowledged the single bed until all our belongings were packed in. Then we glared as if that would somehow cut the bed in half, which obviously never happened. Where was Cyclops when you needed him?

The place was cozy, the typical sort of beach locale, I think, with white boarded walls like the planks of a ship and a soft pale blue comforter. There were a handful of fluffy pillows with seashell details on the bed. Those same seashell details matched the few knick knacks scattered throughout the room on the two end stands, the TV stand, and the desk. There was even a little mini-fridge and microwave. Directly across from the door was a bathroom, nearly all white save for tiles along the center wall with more seashells. The towels and shower curtain were the same pale blue as the comforter to add a splash of color.

"I call the left side." I swiftly rounded the bed to the side away from the window.

"I get first shower then." The bathroom door slammed shut behind him.

I mocked Beau once he was gone, childishly prancing around the room. I was half tempted to kick his bag if I wasn't fearful of the possibly expensive camera equipment within. My parents surely wouldn't let me get away without paying him back for it so his belongings were safe, for now.

With my phone plugged in to charge, I finally acknowledged the group chat with my friends, smirking at the handful of messages that were sent sometime earlier when I fell asleep in the car;

Anthony: Twenty bucks Beau's body is found in a ditch by the end of the trip
Who's in?

Niel: I'm putting twenty on Devin getting whacked.
Dude is way more annoying ;D

Gwen: I say they're both dead because their parents drown them in the ocean. If I had to put up with the two of them on vacation, I'd surely get rid of them both.

Devin: Your faith in me is most appreciated, dear friends. I am here to inform you that no one has died yet
HOWEVER!
This may change soon as I have discovered something that will certainly spell our doom.

Gwen: doooooo telllll

Anthony: Color me intrigued.
Go on.

Devin: Since the room was cheaper...
Our parents got us one room with one bed.

Niel: Wow, I expected you were gonna get whacked, but not in that way.
Save thy ass for marriage.
Do not give in to sin, my child.

Gwen: The hate fuck will be intensssssseeeee

Anthony: After you're beat
Give the deets
Let us know what happened in the sheets

Devin: I hope you all die.
THIS IS SERIOUS!!!! LKDSAJFLSKDJ

Niel: oop, he mad cause it tru
But seriously that sucks, please don't get whacked

Anthony: How's dickward taking it?
And I don't mean that sexually

Gwen: He probably needs it sexually since I bet he's in a piss poor mood

Devin: No shit. We agreed on a truce to spare ourselves and our parents
these two weeks, but you know how we are

Anthony: Not like you have to hang out during the day though, right?

Gwen : There's others at the beach, swim, hang out, steer clear so you only
see each other at night

Niel: what they said ^ lol
Find a stranger and spend the night with them instead ;D

I hesitated to respond; the thought lingering in the back of my mind like a
heavy weight.

Find a stranger? Honestly...I would if I could. One night stands weren't my
thing, never were. Sex in general was almost a foreign concept that others
spoke of vehemently while I struggled to keep up, to fit in. Not to say I
didn't always enjoy sex or never wanted some. My one and only girlfriend,
Stacia, who was a close friend prior and was luckily all of my firsts, was the
only one I could say I actually, honestly, enjoyed having sex with.
Sometimes I wondered if we'd still be together if she didn't move across the

country last year. However, since her, there hadn't been a time where I really wanted sex? Or enjoyed it?

Twice I hooked up with girls. Twice there was alcohol. Twice I went through the motions, was happy they enjoyed it, only to realize afterwards that what I felt was vastly different than what others did.

And, wow, the notion of sleeping with a stranger or obsessing over celebs, I *never* got that. They were attractive in the sense that they were visually appealing, but if given the chance to sleep with one? I'd say no in a heartbeat. And that also applied to the so-called hot people I met in day to day life. Sometimes I desperately wished my brain would shut up and let my nether regions do the talking, something others didn't seem to struggle with nearly as much. Have one night stands, be capable of sleeping with someone on the first date without alcohol or overthinking every damn thing, or be able to crack jokes with friends without worrying they'll somehow see right through my lies.

Sometimes I wished I had the courage to be myself.

The bathroom door swung open with an abrupt thud. Beau stepped out dressed in boxers and an open side tank top. Ruffling the damp locks of his hair with a towel, he took a silent seat on the edge of the bed. Although nothing was said, the air was thick enough to choke on. My previous thoughts were set aside.

Devin: gtg my turn to get a shower and gonna try to sleep
Updates will be given tomorrow

Niel: don't forget condoms

Gwen: you could delve into the world of BDSM and claim it was accidental choking?

Anthony: *spits tea*
HA!

Devin: Die, assholes

I clicked off before my useless friends could piss me off further. They always teased because, well, I always teased and karma is a bitch. What else were friends for? Beau and I have been stuck to each other like glue since birth because of our parents so he was easy ammunition. Now we were stuck even closer, sharing a bed for two weeks when we could barely share a room.

"Hurry up," he growled. "I'm not putting up with you clamoring around all night. I want some decent sleep."

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I've been dead quiet since we got here," I argued, huffing when I hopped off the bed to grab my own clothes.

He finished drying his long mane, moving on to briefly dry the faded undercut when I entered the bathroom. A single eye pierced me beneath the towel when I scowled and said, "I'm not happy about this either so don't take your frustration out on me."

"Whatever."

He threw the damp towel at my face. I caught it with a hissed curse, threatening to reply with a hit of my own, but he was already crawling under the covers. The grumbling lump settled, breathing evening out almost instantly. I wasn't sure if he fell asleep that fast or not, but I made sure to be quiet after getting out of the shower.

We fell asleep with our backs to each other and enough space for another to fit between us.

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They've made it to the beach! We got some more Beau and Devin interactions, but oh boy do they like to tease each other. How do you think things will play it with them sharing a bed? Yeah, I went for the cheesy route, fight me xD But more importantly, what do you think about Devin's thoughts concerning his sexuality?

First picture of mine to share. My phone doesn't take the best pictures, but here's the beach at night!



4

Beau's sleeping face mere inches from my own wasn't exactly my ideal wake up call, but it worked. I went from half conscious to panic level awareness in under .001 seconds. So his dumb ass was kicked out of bed real quick. A surprised shout followed the heavy bang of his body hitting the floor, dragging most of the covers with him.

"What the hell!?" A pair of eyes hotter than the flames of hell stabbed me from the edge of the mattress.

"I should be the one asking that! Why were you invading my side of the bed?"

Still half asleep, he ruffled his messy bedhead when hissing between clenched teeth, "What?"

"You. Invading. My side. Of the bed!" I reiterated, stabbing my finger against the mattress with every word. "Your face was this close—" I hovered my hand a mere inch from my face as an example. "I thought I had died and went to hell then kicked you away in a panic so it's your own fault."

He was so taken aback that his jaw dropped. With barely a second of contemplation, he accusingly pointed when arguing "Dumb ass, look who was the one that was actually invading someone's space!"

I cocked a brow, peering about the bed to realize that I had somehow ended up in the middle of the bed. The left side was empty, although that was where I had fallen asleep. Like hell I was going to back down though.

"I wasn't in your space. I was in the middle, which was no one's space."

"You realize that makes no sense, right?"

Yeah, but I crossed my arms and pretended like I didn't.

First official day of vacation and already, the first fight ensued. I was yanked off the bed by my ankle. The ground stunned me enough to shout. Beau was up and grumbling in search of clothes a second later. I barely composed myself by the time the bathroom door slammed shut behind him.

Good thing we didn't make some form of bet on the truce because we would have lost already.

I rolled back onto the bed in search of my phone. It was a little past eight. While I was the type to sleep until noon when given the opportunity, that was not the case today. There was a beach to get to, and it seemed I was not the only one ready to go.

A knock at the door had me slipping out of bed. Mom called from the other side, grinning with breakfast in hand when the door opened. Aunt Zoey was with her. The two scurried in to sit two glasses of orange juice on the desk along with some bagels and muffins.

Vacation mode was already activated for the both of them. Mom had some type of bright shawl over her swimsuit. Her flip flops clicked with every step. Aunt Zoey wasn't much different, wearing some mesh shirt with a giant straw hat and sunglasses. I was eager to join in on this laidback, beach mode. I doubted I'd be wearing a shirt for the next week and was suddenly grateful for my naturally tan complexion because, unlike a certain someone, I wouldn't burn to a crisp as easily. Although, knowing me, I'd use that as an excuse not to put on sunblock and come back home with third degree burns by the end of the trip.

"I didn't think you guys would be up yet," Aunt Zoey said just as Beau stepped out of the bathroom. He changed into swim trunks and another open sided tank. He acted like I had the damn plague, stepping around me to get to the food.

"We were so excited to be at the beach that we got up early for once," I lied. He angrily chewed his breakfast. Wasn't sure how one did that, but he was pulling it off.

"We already ate, but grabbed you both a few things from the office. They had a few breakfast snacks in there," Aunt Zoey explained while rubbing Beau's back. "Your dad's are already finding us a spot on the beach so we're going to head out."

"Eat up and put on sunblock before you go," Mom ordered, watching me in particular as if she somehow knew what I was thinking earlier. With half a bagel in my mouth, I only grunted in response.

"Oh, I brought stuff to make sand castles too!" Aunt Zoey gripped Beau's arm to inform him that, regardless of what he wanted, they would be making sand castles at some point. "We'll build some later. I want us to have the whole cliché family beach trip experience."

Oddly enough, I had no disagreements. More oddly enough, neither did Beau, or at least he didn't voice them.

"If you're gonna go off by yourselves, please keep your phones nearby so we can get a hold of you," Mom said when stepping out of the room.

Aunt Zoey followed. "We're going to meet back up in the parking lot around noon, ok? We'll all find some place to grab lunch. Seafood by the sea! It'll be great!"

"I'm going to find the most expensive thing on the menu," I teased.

"Then you're paying for it yourself," Mom shot back then they both were gone. Unlike a certain someone, they did not slam the door behind them. That was called being polite, which I would have voiced if we weren't unbelievably tense already.

Beau switched the TV on while we ate. Neither of us said a word, him sitting at the desk chair and me on the edge of the bed. When I was grabbing clothes to change, he was gathering his camera. I raised a brow when he brought out a tripod.

"What's that for?" I asked, which should have been phrased better since it was obvious what it was for. It was a freaking tripod.

"My camera."

"Thanks, Sherlock, but you know what I mean."

He didn't answer, only slung his bag of camera supplies and a beach towel over his shoulder then walked out the door.

"Hey!" I called. He obviously didn't respond. The door slammed shut.

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The beach at night was breathtaking; the beach during the day somehow even more so.

Although the shore was crowding with families packing chairs, towels, and umbrellas, nothing could deter from the beauty of the ocean. The sand was more white in the sunlight and the water itself a sweet blue with tints of green in rolling waves. With a clear sky, the sea once again mirrored it in color. There wasn't a hint of clouds so the sun cast warm rays over the shore. In the sunlight, the rippling ocean almost had endless colors among the white bubbles. As if someone dumped a bottle of glitter, the water sparkled and carried me out up to my waist.

I took my first crash under the waves, jumping out afterwards with the shivers. There were others like me, merely enjoying the ocean, allowing themselves to be rocked back and forth on inner tubes and boogie boards. My parents probably packed some too. I already knew where they were since I gave Mom my phone, which she scowled about since I was supposed to keep it on me. How was I meant to do that in the water? Hmm?

Our parents weren't alone though, Beau was with them. The tripod was set up, pointed towards the sea. A chair was stationed behind it, he peered through the lens. Didn't seem he was enjoying the pictures though because he was scowling. Then again, when wasn't he?

A group of girls walked by. Two glanced back, giggling at Beau who didn't pay them any mind. Even here he was considered a heart throb, what a load of shit.

Two umbrellas were set up. Aunt Zoey and Mom were on towels under one while two chairs were under the other. Uncle David was slathering sun block on since, like his son, he was also a vampire. I was shocked Beau hadn't burst into flames yet, and by shocked I meant mildly disappointed. Wouldn't have minded watching him scurry into the sea in hopes to put himself out, or merely turn to ash on the beach.

"Did you already jump in?" Dad laughed.

"Obviously, what's the point of coming to the ocean if you don't jump in?" I cast a glance to Beau. He was too focused on his camera to care.

"Do we have any inner tubes or something?" I dug through a big bag by Mom's side. She was about to answer me when I discovered one, tugging out a bright green inner tube and blowing air into it.

"Beau, are you not getting in?" Aunt Zoey asked, peering over Mom. He shook his head.

"Why? You scared?" I taunted.

He had the camera off the tripod, messing with some functions. "I'm busy."

Then he was gone, heading down the shoreline to take more pictures.

Dad patted me on the back. "I'll get in with ya. Let me get the other raft."

Dad joined me in the ocean with our inner tubes then Uncle David, Aunt Zoey and Mom tagged along eventually. There was some loud squealing when Dad started swinging Mom around in the water. Uncle David kept dunking me. Aunt Zoey was finding seashells and driftwood that she thought would look cool for some art projects. The folks didn't have as much energy as me though, so it seemed. All inevitably returned to their beach towels; where Beau had returned as well.

I didn't want to sit around on the beach, I wanted to have fun! I was about to angrily stomp over and drag Beau's sorry ass into the ocean whether he

liked it or not when I was suddenly hit in the side. I cursed in surprise, glaring at the volleyball that dropped at my feet.

"Sorry about that!" someone called. A girl came running over with dark brown eyes and ochre skin, likely around my age. She smiled apologetically. Behind her there was a volleyball net with two guys and another girl waiting.

"Not a problem." I picked up the volleyball to hand to her. "Are you looking for more players though?"

"Sure!" The girl chirped then glanced back. "Ah, we'd be uneven, but that's fine."

"What if I brought someone else?" I suggested, doing my best to hold back an evil grin. She made no mention of said evil grin, only nodded.

"Cool, the more the merrier! Ah, my name's Jill, by the way."

"Devin."

"Come on over with your friend once you grab them." Jill jogged back to play, explaining the situation to her friends while I ran over to Beau. He nearly fell out of his chair in surprise when I slapped my hands on the arm of it.

"Let's play volleyball," I said, grinning down at his clearly disinterested face.

"No."

"There's a group of kids our age playing over there!" I pointed in their direction. "It'll be uneven if only I join."

"Drag some other unwilling participant. I'm not interested."

"Beau," came Aunt Zoey's low sigh. "Why don't you go play a match? You may make some friends to spend time with while you're here."

He snorted. "Why would I want that?"

"It's ok, Aunt Zoey, I understand." I shrugged, already walking away but sensing Beau's watchful eyes linger on my back. His unwavering attention had me standing proudly, chin in the air. "He's too scared he'll get his ass whooped in a match against me."

There it was; the spark of competition that even the cold hearted Beau could not deny. He was stomping past me in under two seconds, muttering under his breath, "I'll fucking run you into the dirt."

The triumphant grin consumed my features. " *Technically* , it's sand, and no you won't."

Jill spotted the two of us heading over, putting a quick pause to the match. Her friends faced us, all giving the typical welcoming smile that many are either really good at or really bad. In my case, I was really good and in Beau's, well, he didn't give a welcoming smile, only crossed his arms. The not so friendly look didn't deter interest though because, sure enough, Jill's friends were staring at him. Yes, friends, plural.

The girl with warm tawny skin averted her gaze when brushing strands of black hair behind her ear. One of the boys had a flush against beige cheeks, switching his weight from one foot to the other. I wanted to bury Beau's face in the sand. How the hell did he attract both of them in under a second? Wow, I fucking hated him. The world was cruel and unfair.

"Thanks for letting us join," I said, gesturing to myself first. "I'm Devin—" I slapped Beau in the stomach. He grunted. "And this is Beau. He's a bit of an asshole, so I apologize in advance."

That got a laugh from the group. Jill introduced all of them, apparently the other girl was her older sister, Tara. Johnny and Avi were their friends; all four of them in college so I was right to assume they were around our age. Beau joined Tara and Johnny's team, which they both were grinning about, while I was with Jill and Avi.

I soon discovered that volleyball on the beach was way more difficult than in gym class. The sand made it hard to maneuver. When I wanted to run for the ball I'd end up slipping and face planting. Each time I got up, Beau was showing something other than apathy; amusement at my suffering. In those moments, I preferred apathy, the freaking assclown.

The game had nothing to do with competition, but I couldn't deny that I was grumbling at the fact that their team was ahead. Beau knew it too. He smirked from the other side of the net, at least until Tara lost her footing. She tripped into Beau, who gripped her shoulders to keep her up right. The way her face lit up should have been funny or maybe even a little endearing, but I was neither laughing or endeared.

"You ok?" Beau asked, which threw me for a loop.

Since when was he the type to care? If that were me, he'd let me fall on my face! Beau wasn't nice. That went against Beau policy!

"I-I'm fine!" Tara squeaked. She practically threw herself on the other side of the court, or whatever one wanted to call it. "S-Sorry."

He shrugged then raised a brow at me, probably because I was glaring. Why was I glaring? Because it was Beau; glaring was a natural reaction.

So was wanting to win, the two of us getting competitive and trying to one up the other. Of course I was agitated that the score remained the same, and of course I wanted to do my best to change that. When the ball came onto our side of the court, I didn't think twice about jumping. Did I know how to spike in a normal gym, let alone on the beach? No. Was I going to try anyways? Yep!

I smacked the ball as hard as I could, mentally cheering that it miraculously cleared the net. However, Beau was close to said net and not expecting a spike from a dumb ass that didn't know how to spike. One moment he was in front of me; the next he was stumbling away, cursing after being struck in the face.

Beau crouched with a cupped hand over his nose. Johnny was the first to react, hesitantly touching his shoulder. "Shit, are you ok?"

When he stood, there was red staining his pale skin.

"Oh my god, is your nose broken?!" Tara gasped.

He pulled his hand away to reveal a bloody nose. There was more on his palm. He smacked his lips together, likely having got some in his mouth. Then he tilted his head forward again. My heart sank into my stomach. My feet were cemented into the sand that I wished would swallow me whole.

"I don't think it's broke," he grumbled.

I swiftly attempted an apology, "Shit, Beau, I'm sorry...I didn't mean to do that."

The only response I got was him leaving. I was quick to follow, apologizing to the others for the commotion without listening to their responses.

"Beau, wait up! You don't even have the key for the hotel room!"

He kept walking. I ran to our parents, not explaining what happened since Mom would probably give me a bloody nose too for being so stupid. He was waiting by the door when I got there, head still lowered. Once the door opened, he roughly pushed me aside. I would have complained, but it was warranted considering I busted his nose with a volleyball. On accident though, seriously!

Beau hung over the sink, allowing the blood to drip into the water. He splashed some on his face, cleaning the red from his skin. He spat some out, gurgling water to clean out the taste. A towel was now stained. The bleeding had mostly stopped. A bit slipped out of his right nostril that he dabbed away, visceral hatred practically seeping from every word when he growled, "What the fuck was that?"

And my dumb ass somehow thought replying with snark was a good idea, "A volleyball to the nose, I guess."

The disbelief on his face was almost painful.

"How was I supposed to know you wouldn't dodge it?!" I hollered when his cold scrutiny became too much. "I said I didn't mean it, it was obviously an accident!"

"One you're probably thrilled to have made."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Beau ran a rag under cold water to press to his likely aching nose. "You know damn well what it means."

"You can't be serious? We talk shit all the time but that doesn't mean I actually want to hurt you!"

My admission hung in the air. Beau almost challenged me with a glare; to take it back and admit the truth, but that was the truth. It was the truth that was hidden behind constant jabs and cruel remarks.

If Beau believed me or not, I wasn't sure. He didn't ask for an explanation or accuse me of lying, not verbally at least. Once more, I was brushed aside with a shove. My back roughly hit the doorframe when he stepped out of the bathroom to sit on bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He flipped the TV on. "Just go. I have a headache."

"But—"

"Seriously, Devin. Go."

I didn't want to, but I hadn't the courage to say anything. I quietly left, frowning as the view of Beau sitting alone in bed with a pained scowl was cut off by the door closing behind me.

Although the teams were uneven, I rejoined the others on the beach. Jill invited Beau and I to join them later that night at the small amusement park

on the pier. There were some games, rides, food stalls, and a ferris wheel that opened sometime around six. I had been eying it all day. The folks suggested we visit, but if I had people my own age to hang out with, I'd rather go with them. They were leaving the next morning too so more reason to go while they were there.

Beau though? After what happened, who knew what he wanted to do.

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Poor Devin, it really was an accident! And now Beau is mad at him but, eh, that's not much of a change, is it lol How will these two grow closer when they're always at each other's throat?

Pictures of the beach during the day, although I went when it was cold so there wasn't really anyone there lol



5

Apparently, Beau wanted to be at the amusement park with those his own age too because, there he was, interacting with Johnny while in line for a ride when evening came around.

When we met up with our parents for lunch earlier, it was hella awkward and painful for my eardrums. Mom discovered the truth. Although the volleyball attack was an accident, she gave a lecture about how competition is great and all, but keep your head on straight, or something along those lines. I wasn't listening all that much. Contrary to popular belief, I did continue to feel like shit, especially when spotting the light bruising around Beau's nose.

We didn't associate the rest of the afternoon. Hell, he didn't even say hi when meandering towards us at the front gates of the park at six o'clock that night. The only reason he knew where we were going, and what time, was because he overheard me talking at lunch, but I didn't even get an acknowledgement of my existence? Ok, cool, whatever.

He was steering clear of me, speaking mostly with Johnny as we went from ride to ride and stall to stall. Not that I cared. Avi was shit at the games so watching his failures turn into cries of anguish over lost money was hilarious. Tara was pretty shy, hiding mostly behind Jill, but when she did get excited she'd forget what quiet meant and shout or squeal. Jill was about as rowdy as me so while the others needed a break from the rides, we kept on truckin'.

Thinking back, there was nothing exceedingly special about that evening. No signs that our lives would change from a few actions. I was laughing with new acquaintances that, if we had the time to get to know each other better, may have been friends one day.

And Beau? He was suddenly missing. So was Johnny.

"Hey, where'd Beau and Johnny go?" I asked upon discovering that the two quiet ones of the group had somehow vanished.

"Huh?" Avi spun around in search of our missing companions.

"They probably got tired of us and went off on their own," said Jill between bites of her cotton candy. Tara was pulling a few pieces of the fluff off as well. "Johnny just broke up with his boyfriend before the trip so he has disappeared on us a few times when he needed the space. Maybe Beau followed him somewhere to relax for a bit."

"Or make out." Avi sniggered.

Tara's shoulders slumped forward resulting in Avi poking her childishly in the ribs a few times. She didn't so much as flinch, only shoved another handful of sweet rejection fluff in her mouth.

"They'll probably pop back up later, come on!" Jill grabbed my arm. "Let's ride the ferris wheel!"

With no time to argue, I was tugged along by the group that weren't nearly as shocked by the idea of Beau sneaking off with Johnny as I was.

Although I laughed and smiled on the ferris wheel and through the crowded pier, my thoughts did not mirror such happiness. In a sense, I almost felt guilty for denying it; Beau didn't go off with Johnny. They weren't alone together. They weren't doing anything. There was no need to worry because it was Beau, as if that somehow proved anything.

Besides, even if they were together...it wasn't any of my business. What he did was none of my concern. Who he decided to do anything with wasn't any of my business, nor was I saddened by that fact. I didn't care.

More like I didn't want to care.

When the evening came to an end, Beau and Johnny were nowhere to be found. Neither were answering their phones either. Jill, Avi, Tara, and I separated around eleven since they were leaving early in the morning to

return home. I overheard Avi betting with Tara on whether or not Johnny would even show up until morning. My chest tightened. I pretended not to notice, just like I pretended I didn't go to the dark beach to mope.

I kicked a twig into the ocean along with a spray of sand. Blisters had formed on the sides of my feet. I carried my sandals while making a mental note to wear sneakers on the pier tomorrow, if I went. That note was torn to shreds when there was sudden movement beneath the pier. There were two figures, neither of which noticed or cared about me trudging along in the evening waves.

The figures stepped out from the shadows. I recognized both immediately. Johnny and Beau walked hand in hand, each step slow, taking all the time in the world to enjoy the end of an evening. Their shirts clung to their damp skin. Their voices were soft, bits and pieces of a quiet conversation mixed in with crashing waves.

Johnny laughed. Beau smiled, nothing like the ones he showed at school or forced when spending time with me. No, the smile for Johnny was authentic; a slight wrinkle in his nose, showing the top row of his teeth and a single, elusive dimple on his right cheek.

As if I was a spy about to get caught on a dangerous mission, I rushed behind one of the beams of the pier to hide. My heart was hammering in my chest, toes squishing into the sands. I wasn't sure what to do, make myself known so I wouldn't be a creep listening into their conversation, or wait until they leave and pretend nothing ever happened later.

"Thanks for listening," said Johnny.

"Wasn't a problem," Beau responded softly. "I know it's tough when it feels like there's no one to talk to."

I was suddenly a little aware of what he possibly meant by that. The thought never crossed my mind, now it was the only thought on my mind.

I chanced taking a peek, shifting around a beam to peer through the dark. They were closer to the hotels, paying no mind to the pier or the idiot

hiding beneath the shadowy structure. Their silhouettes were illuminated by the light of the fair above, but their faces were harder to distinguish with how they were standing.

I didn't need to distinguish either of them though when Johnny spoke, "Feel free to get in contact with me if you ever want to talk, or if you're ever in New Jersey for a bit. Maybe we'll see each other around?"

"A guy can hope."

Johnny chuckled then leaned in for a kiss.

I swung away fast, staring silently into the seemingly eternal ocean waves. The cool water splashed against my curled toes. My fingers ached from the pressure upon the wooden beam. There was another ache, a silent cry that was pushed to the back of my mind.

"Bye, Beau," he whispered.

If Beau replied, I didn't hear it. I had become one with the wooden beam. My full weight pressed against the damp structure, face scrunched up from the pressure. Asking myself what I witnessed was stupid, but I was asking.

What the hell had I just witnessed? A kiss on the beach, dumbass.

But that kiss on the beach was between Beau and Johnny. Beau, that didn't smile like that or laugh or flirt or kiss or was, arguably, human in any way. I was always so sure he was some sort of alien or demonic spirit. Perhaps he still was, because he was continuing to haunt me, only in another way.

So he had gone off with Johnny. They were alone together. They had done something. There was...no need to worry because it wasn't any of my business. I repeated that over and over in hopes to quell the weight in my stomach. Take away the taste of disappointment on the tip of my tongue or stop the shortness of breath, but that didn't happen. In fact, they got worse when I worked up the courage to leave.

I expected Beau to have left during my long inner turmoil. Instead, the moment I was in the soft light of the pier, a very wide-eyed boy caught me in a trembling green gaze.

Beau had sauntered into the water that washed up to his ankles rather than left. Then that water was gone when he didn't say a word, only pivoted on the heels of his feet to stomp towards the hotel.

If I hadn't seen what I did, I would have assumed he merely didn't want to see me. That was probably why Beau did his best to act his usual self; be annoyed and avoid me. There was no way I was hiding that I saw though. He heard my heavy steps and picked up the already brisk pace.

"Beau, wait up!" I called as if I had any idea what to say. I didn't. I definitely didn't, especially when I caught hold of his wrist.

For the first time, he was tense in a way that words couldn't describe. Every muscle clenched with fear that didn't show on his face or in his quiet tone.

"What?" he asked, throwing a glare over his shoulder.

What was a very good question, a question I hadn't the answer to. When my silence lingered, he attempted to pull away, which only tightened my grip and urged the truth out in a rushed breath, "I, uh, I saw you and Johnny. I saw the kiss."

That was as simple as it got and the issue with simple was that it led to misunderstandings.

Beau misunderstood.

There was no act, only intense rage written into the wrinkles of his snarling lips. The smile was gone. Admittedly, after seeing it, I began to think that I preferred Beau with that smile.

"You were snooping?" he growled.

Taking a menacing step forward, he broke into my space, uncaring if I had four inches on him or not. In that moment, I was small and he towered over

me with the intent to defend himself like a cornered beast.

"It's not like I tried to snoop! I was taking a walk and saw you two." I explained just as he ripped his wrist from me.

"And you stood by to listen, which is snooping."

"I saw you two holding hands and was surprised!"

That wasn't good to bring up. Beau cracked his neck to the side. The sound was louder than thunder.

"Surprised?" he asked. "Don't you mean amused?"

That confused me. Beau gave no time to voice that confusion. The misunderstanding grew to astronomical proportions when he shoved me. I stumbled, now glaring right back.

"Are you happy now?" he hissed, advancing towards me with clenched fists. "This must be your dream, having something to hold over my head."

"What? No!"

"Your little group of friends will have a good laugh tonight. I imagine the whole town will know before our vacation ends."

"That's bullshit and you know it!" I hollered, giving a shove of my own. Beau was startled enough to trip over his feet. He narrowly avoided landing on his ass.

"Don't fucking accuse me of being the type of person to out someone! How much of an asshole do you think I am?" I hissed.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" The anger suddenly diminished, as if someone had rebuilt the cracked dam in Beau's mind. The river of anger was held back, but for how long?

His arms rested listlessly at his sides, lips turned into a deep frown when he whispered, "Come on, Devin, we always try to one up each other. We walk

all over one another every chance we get and now you have the chance to ruin everything for me."

Beau slowly shattered before my eyes. Wasn't he the one with a stone cold facade? Then why was he so obvious then; eyes brimming with tears and his entire body shivering.

His voice broke when he spoke, "You could tell my parents and...and maybe they would understand, or maybe they'll be so disappointed that their only child is gay. Tell my friends and, suddenly, I may not have friends anymore. Tell our little backwater town and I'll never be able to show my face again without fear that someone will hurt me, or do much worse. Isn't that what you want? For me to leave and never come back. So isn't this the best opportunity for you?"

"No, it's not!"

Beau flinched. There was an argument building judging on the shaking of his fists. He was cornered and lashing out, I understood that. I was beginning to feel the same way; ashamed of myself to make him feel that way, but also ashamed of him for thinking so little of me. He was right though, and he had every right to think that way, but I didn't want him to. Not then, not when there was more we had in common, more than he realized.

"I'm not going to tell. I'll never tell, not to my friends or the town or our parents. Only you have the right to come out when and how you see fit just —" The words caught in my throat, but when watching Beau's shoulders slowly relax, I suddenly wanted to know what that was like. To relax.

To tell someone.

"I know it's tough when it feels like there's no one to talk to."

To know what it's like to have someone to talk to, even if that someone is Beau.

"Just like it's my right to come out when and how I want to," I whispered, incapable of watching his reaction so I focused on the sand. The sand that was taken from my vision when his legs came into view.

"Devin," he called. The sound caved in around me. "You're not—" he cleared his throat. "...you're not messing with me, are you?"

"Is this something to mess around about?" I grumbled.

"So you're...?"

"I don't like specifics," I answered honestly because that was the first time I ever spoke of this outloud. The truth spilled out like water from a broken faucet. "I'm only eighteen for fucks sake. It feels like so much pressure, as if I have to throw a label on myself to be listened to or respected."

Suddenly, I felt exposed, as if someone had peeled off more than my clothes. They removed my very skin, leaving the nerves bare to pluck like crying guitar strings until they snapped.

I gripped my own bicep, uncaring of the bruising pressure when I spoke, "I researched, hoping to find someone that felt similar and I did find quite a bit. Demisexual seemed pretty close, needing some type of emotional connection prior to sexual attraction, but at the same time all the specifics and the labels were daunting and terrifying. I felt like I was becoming an identity rather than a person."

Sometime during the rant, I sat down. Fallen was probably a better description. Beau followed. The sand was cool beneath my hands. They were shaking, or maybe my entire body was. I wasn't sure because I watched the water. I almost hoped it'd wash me out with the waves.

"Labels feel like someone's choking me," I explained. "I'm glad there's an identity that rings so true with some people that it makes them feel safe, seen, understood, but that isn't the case for me. I don't want to slap my sexuality on my profile or even wear it on my clothes. Some make it seem like you're lesser because of that, like you aren't queer enough, or assume

you aren't queer at all because you aren't screaming about it from the rooftops. I don't want that. I don't want to be an identity. I'm Devin."

I slapped my own chest, twisting my fingers into my shirt. "I'm Devin first. There's a lot to me, and only I will determine if you're someone I want to tell or not. That's my choice and it should *always* be my choice."

"You're right," he said.

The response built up the courage to finally face him, surprised to find not a glare or some face of annoyance, but rather a soft smile. A smile different from the one with Johnny, a reminder that a person has many sides to them and even Beau hadn't revealed all of his. For the first time, I wanted to see them, each and every one.

Beau's smiles made me greedy.

"If you don't want to label yourself, whether it's only now or forever, that's entirely up to you. You're not suddenly any less valid, Devin," he said like it was a fact, like no one in the world could argue against him and therefore couldn't argue against me. I took a breath and wondered if I had ever really known how to properly breathe before then.

Beau was the person I claimed to hate the most. He was also the person that made me the most relieved. That was a truth I had kept to myself, that I never considered sharing, but I did on a random night with my so-called enemy on the beach.

We were quiet for a while. Only the ocean kept us company until Beau asked, "Have you told anyone else, like, your friends at school?"

"Nope. Have you?"

"No."

"Ah...c-cool."

"Yeah...cool."

The waves were loud or maybe we were too quiet. My skin broke out with goosebumps. Were they from the breeze or my feelings? Wasn't sure, didn't want to find out either.

"We should head back," I said with a clear of my throat. My legs were wobbly when I stood. Neither of us mentioned the obvious nerves in my movements, or the fact that I held out my hand for him that he easily took.

The walk to the hotel was quiet, but oddly comforting. There was no argument on who got the first shower. Beau easily let me go first. By the time he finished, I was already in bed. The mattress dipped when he joined, probably thinking I was already asleep based on how quiet he was.

That night, there was a little less space between us on the bed, perhaps even in our minds...

And maybe in our hearts too.

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Now this was quite the chapter! Devin and Beau's secrets are known, shared between so-called enemies. What do you think about Devin's feelings concerning himself and sexuality in general? How do you think this will change their relationship, if at all? Devin is my spirit animal tbh, he's the embodiment of how I feel. I love him >.<

Unfortunately, the fair was closed when I visited the beach D= Again, we went when it was cooler so not everything was open, but it look like a lot of fun

6

Change was fickle. Change did not take feelings or timing into account. Change came when it wished, how it wished, as a slow process or all at once.

Change hit us like a hundred pounds of bricks dropped from a sixteenth floor.

Beau was the first to wake the following morning. He sat at the desk with breakfast; toast with jam. The plate that remained had toast with the edges cut off and a glass of apple juice instead of orange.

"Mom must be feeling extra nice today. She never cuts the edges off for me anymore," I said. Maybe I shouldn't have though because Beau's response had that piece of toast hanging from my mouth in shock.

"I got us breakfast today." He rummaged around in his pockets. A moment later, a few band-aids and ointment were placed on the table. "For your blisters," he explained like he was speaking about the damn weather. "Mom gave them to me."

The temptation to ask if he specifically went to see her in hopes to get that for me was strong. In the end, I couldn't bring myself to question the truth. I wasn't sure if I was grateful or confused and a response may only make that worse. They seemed really simple, but the most simple of actions often left the greatest impact.

"Ah, um, thanks," I said when taking the offered medical supplies.

He hummed. The TV was all that cut through the silence. Noise that drifted in one ear and out the other, nothing more than static in my mind.

"So, are you going off to take more pictures today?" I inquired when we both were ready to leave. Beau slipped the room key into his camera bag.

"I planned to. Why?"

"Just curious."

Another hum then we went our separate ways. I was a little disappointed; in myself or Beau, I wasn't so sure.

Our second day at the beach and the skies were very not clear. There was a solemn overcast that left the shore drab, mirroring my own glum thoughts. The once blue sea matched the sky in color, a dirty gray with dark sands. That didn't stop anyone from enjoying the ocean though.

I frolicked the same as yesterday, but my eyes continuously studied the shoreline for a familiar face. When I caught a glimpse of Beau, he was never looking my way. I told myself I wasn't disappointed.

Then Aunt Zoey kept her promise. She was disheartened upon discovering the plastic tools brought had broken when in the trunk. Our misfortunes did not deter her from her goal; to build sand castles. In the end, we sat with our parents digging moats and attempting to make a fort.

The one time I accidentally fell on Beau's rather impressive wall resulted in a glare, nothing more. Our parents were shocked. Mom even asked, "What's up with you two today?"

"H-Huh?" I sputtered, swiftly sitting upright. Beau quietly put the wall back in order.

"You're not arguing."

"And Beau didn't try to murder you for destroying his magnificent wall," Uncle David added, smirking at Beau's dark expression.

"It was an accident." I nervously laughed.

Our parents gave each other looks, but, seeing as we weren't fighting, they deemed it alright not to pry. I was relieved because I wasn't sure what to say. That sentiment lingered throughout the day too, a shared feeling so it seemed. Beau and I never said a word to each other, not even when feeding

the seagulls...who ended up stealing my flip flops. That at least got a laugh, one that Beau cut off when catching my attention.

He didn't help get my flip flops back either. Jerk.

The second day at the beach ended without incident, or perhaps no incident still constituted as an incident. The answer was unclear, as unclear as the growing tension between two that were often the very definition of tension.

Beau and I went to sleep at different times. He was out almost the moment we returned after dinner while I lay awake in bed wondering what the hell was going on.

Were we fighting? Did Beau not believe me? Was he continuing to suspect that I would out him? I didn't know how to ask or if I should, so I didn't.

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The following day was better, even if Beau disappeared all morning. After lunch, when I deemed listening to our parents lament over childhood stories to be both boring and detrimental to my health, I decided to head into town for an afternoon snack only to spot Beau at the indoor pool. He was alone. Although I hadn't originally planned to ever take a dip in the pool, I washed off the sand in our hotel room. I refused to acknowledge that I rushed in hopes that he would still be in the pool by the time I arrived.

He was, and he was confused upon seeing me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Sunbathing," I sarcastically replied, tossing my towel on one of the white chairs.

The room was humid and narrow. Windows lined the left wall while a white door led into either the front office or a closet, wasn't sure, didn't check. There was only a small pool in the room with warm water. Beau kept to the deep end, which was no more than six feet while I sat on the stone steps.

My hair was already sticking to my forehead from the humidity. The intense smell of chlorine assaulted my nostrils.

"Why are you in here?" I asked as if us speaking civilly was a normal occurrence and this wasn't at all weird. It was very fucking weird. Beau said that without having to actually voice it. His swift once over followed with a twisted upper lip spoke enough.

He shot the question back at me. "Why are you?"

"Our parents were being annoying."

"And you find me less annoying?"

"That's a tough choice, but they were getting into the specifics of our conception."

Beau grimaced.

"So I deemed you a better choice."

"I'm honored." He definitely wasn't.

Just like I wasn't happy with the way we were acting; the avoidance and the constant questions of what had gone wrong.

My fingers danced over the surface of the water so the touch tickled my skin. He swam back and forth at the deep end. If the situation were any different, I would have laughed at how stupid he looked, teased and poked until he got red in the face from aggravation.

Not that day though. That day, I worked up the courage to ask, "Are you avoiding me?"

He stopped treading water. He fell beneath the surface, sucking in a breath. Choking a bit, he swam closer so that he was standing with the water up to his shoulders.

"W-What?" he coughed.

"Since we...y'know—" I averted my gaze. "Talked, you've been acting weird."

"There's nothing weird about us not hanging out," Beau disputed.

Out of my peripheral, I caught his attention shift to the entrance, as if he suspected another to walk in. Perhaps he was hoping someone would so the conversation would come to an end. There was no one but us though.

"True, but we're stuck on this vacation together."

"Where we agreed on a truce that is working because there's distance. Besides—" He tapped the side of his slightly bruised nose. "Last time we hung out, I got hit in the face."

"On accident!"

"Right, whatever."

I trudged through the water with thunderous steps and splashes. Jabbing my finger into his chest, I shouted, "You think I have the talent to have aimed that?!"

"Definitely not."

I bristled at the honest answer. The water may have been warm, but I was fairly certain it was about to boil with how hot I was getting. The saddest part? I wasn't sure if the heat had to do with what he said or just him in general.

"But I know you wanted to hit me with it," he dryly accused. "You'll take any chance you can—"

I dunked him.

Beau broke the surface with quick gasps and a loud curse when I attempted to repeat the dunking. Attempt because he grabbed me by the shoulders to return the favor. I shouted when the water overtook me, managing to swallow a mouthful of gross.

"Asshole!" I hollered afterwards. My feet struggled to swipe his out from under him.

"You started it," he said. With a firm hold on my wrists, he swung my arms this way and that while I focused on his feet. We stumbled through the water into the deep end where he sunk.

Beau resurfaced with gritted teeth and a strained jaw. "Shut up," he ordered.

"I didn't say anything."

"You're thinking it."

"What am I thinking?"

"That you're taller than me."

I shrugged, pulling my hands away from him since his grip loosened, and my wrists were tingling. The skin he touched was warmer than the rest. I was definitely only allergic to his bullshit.

"I *am* taller than you." I provoked him with a pompous grin of my own. "Guess it isn't true, eating your vegetables doesn't really help, Mr. I Eat Salads Even While On Vacation."

Beau huffed. "Is that seriously the best title you can come up with? Pathetic."

"Your face is pathetic."

"Are you blind too?"

"You cocky son of a bitch."

He splashed water in my face. Obviously, I had to return the favor.

Soon, the pool turned into a wave pool. There were shouts, curses, and taunts thrown with every crash of our arms against the water. We could barely open our eyes with the constant onslaught of attacks; one after the

other, the sounds mixing in with laughter that neither of us were willing to acknowledge. Too bad acknowledging didn't make the laughter any less real, or the unforeseen affection that came with them.

When a family entered with their young kids though, we silently agreed that it was time to go. We exited the pool, trudging along in our swim trunks to the parking lot. Our feet squeaked with every step.

Beau was heading towards the hotel room when I asked, "Going to split up from me again?"

"What?"

"Are you going to keep avoiding me?" My stomach sank when the worries spilled out in a quiet whisper, "Do you not believe me?"

His eyes widened.

"What I said the other night, or do you think I'll—" I observed the parking lot to double check that we were alone then questioned, "I'll out you?"

"No," he answered with a shift of his weight from one foot to the other. "But it's not like this change's anything. You still annoy me."

That made me quite proud, which had to be obvious based on Beau's grimace.

"Fine," he grunted with a dismissive wave towards town. "What do you want to do?"

"Really?" I gaped. "You aren't going to ditch me?"

"You'll keep bugging me if I try."

"Well..." I eyeballed the storefronts and streets, swiftly realizing that I hadn't an answer. Beau pinched the bridge of his nose when I admitted, "I don't know what I want to do because I honestly didn't think I'd get this far."

Rather than respond to that, he walked away. He flicked his fingers in a signal to follow. I told myself I obeyed out of curiosity, not general happiness to have a promised afternoon together.

We went to the hotel room where Beau kicked on some sneakers, suggesting that I do the same.

"Souvenirs," he said when retrieving some dry clothes. He stripped off the damp shirt when stepping into the bathroom. I averted my gaze.

How many times had we been in a similar situation? Yet each day it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore the unwelcome sensation of spiraling warmth in the pit of my stomach.

"There's a few shops nearby. I want to grab something while here." His voice was muffled from redressing. I hated that I wondered if his muscles were strained, and admittedly a little surprised that the thought made me bite the insides of my cheek.

"You good with that?" he asked, stepping out of the bathroom in dry clothes.

I shoved past him, ignoring the annoyed grunt when I replied, "Yeah, sounds good."

Once we both were in dry clothes and had our wallets, we headed out. It didn't take long to find the first shop of interest. There was a store with an open front filled to the brim with an assortment of random souvenirs from shirts to geodes to shark teeth. So much color in a single place, packed from item to item so that there was barely any wall visible beneath the chaos. The place was as crowded as an extreme hoarders house with incredibly thin walkways only wide enough for a single person. An elderly man sat at the single register where postcards and small keychains resided. He smiled when we walked in. I smiled back since Beau wouldn't.

He didn't say what he was specifically looking for, if anything, so we mosied from aisle to aisle. The clothes weren't really of interest. A few

shirts Beau inspected that weren't for him, as if he would be caught in green and blue tie dye.

"You searching for anyone in particular?" I questioned, seeing as I knew his friends from school. Nine times out of ten, a small school meant unwillingly knowing more than your typical social circle. Not to say I could pick out a good souvenir to buy any of them, but I was making conversation.

"No," he answered. "They'll get whatever they get. They should be honored if I get them anything."

I snickered.

I wasn't sure what to purchase for my friends either. There were a few jars with sand and shells already inside with the beach's name etched into the surface. Wasn't sure I wanted to pay ten dollars for that though, so we moved onto the next.

When my interest was caught, it wasn't for me. There was a wrack of geodes in brown weaved baskets. An amethyst in particular stood out.

"Beau," I called, holding out the rock for the weirdo.

He scurried through the mess to retrieve the rock with eyes of obvious intrigue. There was a small, but growing quickly, rock collection on his dresser for almost a year now. If he kept it up, he would have to get himself an entire room dedicated to the damn things.

"I don't get why you like rocks," I mocked.

"Are you honestly trying to say this doesn't look cool?" He waved the little geode in front of me, which did look like it was taken straight out of a fantasy book. A crystal that stored magical powers or could shoot laser beams, something of the sort. I chose not to admit that though and only shrugged. He clutched the amethyst in his hand, moving on down the line.

"So...do you plan to tell anyone in college?" I asked out of the blue.

Beau tripped over some boxes on the floor. I gripped the back of his shirt to keep him upright, smirking at the glare he sent over his shoulder. That shoulder brushed against my chest from the crowded halls. My fingers may have lingered in his shirt longer than necessary. I flexed them, willing the warmth away.

"What?" he coughed. He searched the store for any that may be listening. There were a few customers, but they were on the other side of the shop with the apparel. "Why are you bringing that up?"

"Am I not allowed to bring it up?"

"I wouldn't say you're not allowed," he grumbled when bringing out a rectangular box. Inside was a mermaid necklace along with an oyster that the buyer opened afterwards to discover what sort of pearl they would get. There was something to do with colors and shapes meaning certain things, but I didn't really care. We both grabbed one for our friends. Gwen had a thing for mermaids so it was a neat gift.

"Then are you?" I asked. We moved to the next aisle.

"I don't know," Beau mumbled. "Maybe."

"Are you hoping to have a hot college romance with some buff football dude?"

I was taken aback by the enigmatic smile thrown over his shoulder when repeating in a low, damn near purring, tone, "Maybe."

There was a sudden twinge in my chest. The smile vanished when he turned away.

My throat was tight when I said, "Have you dated then?"

"You are asking a lot of questions today." He faced me, one hand gripping the white wracks while the other held his possible purchases for the day.

"Since when did you care?"

"I wouldn't say I care."

Beau leaned his weight to the right, arms crossed in a similar manner to my mother when scolding me. I would have made mention of it if I didn't suddenly go off at the mouth, "But I am curious. Our lives have been intertwined since we were kids, y'know."

I watched him in hopes to see some form of agreement or understanding. I was met with a distant stare that dared me to continue, and when did I ever back down from a challenge? Especially from Beau.

"We aren't best friends like our parents, but we know way more than some of our friends. I know you like collecting rocks and love photography. I know you have a fear of spiders, even if you refuse to admit it—"

He flushed at the mention of that phobia, but didn't deny it. Why? Because he literally hurled himself over the back of the couch once when spotting a spider on the coffee table. I almost pissed my pants in laughter that day. Of course, he got me back when discovering my sensitivity to hot food and doused whatever food he could get his hands on in the burning sauce of death.

"You love thriller movies and read probably three books a day. You're actually not a big fan of video games, and I'm fairly certain you would eat chicken for every meal until the day you died if you could. Now there's something new with you that I never knew about and..." My voice caught in my throat. My gaze glued itself to the floor.

Where was I heading? What did I plan to say? Even I wasn't so sure. My heart and mind were having a game of tug of war. Beau wouldn't give either the chance to win.

"And what?" he provoked, accompanied by an annoyingly calm step forward. I felt his heat; soft breaths fanning over my warming cheeks.

"And nothing," I grunted, spinning on my heel to head the opposite way.

If he tried to follow, I wasn't sure. I left him behind to search a few more aisles until my cheeks cooled down. I didn't even get why they were hot in the first place, or I didn't want to really think about why. This was an

unfamiliar territory for me; not one I never felt, but not one that came as often as one may think and especially not towards Beau...

Although it would be a lie if I said it hadn't happened before in instances where I was certain to have gone mad. A brief glimpse of skin during a not so friendly basketball match or the accidental brushing of our arms when forced to sit together during family game night. Sometimes there was a look or a touch that lingered. As if Beau was a weed, he rooted himself into my chest. No matter how much I tried to tear those weeds from the cracks, they returned.

I chose to ignore them.

When I finally met back up with him, he was paying at the counter. Neither of us mentioned whatever that was back there, only bought our souvenirs then stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Let's keep looking," he suggested, wandering down the street to whatever destination caught his interest.

I followed quietly until he came to a sudden halt. I nearly ran into him then stumbled back when he dug in one of his bags. Without warning, Beau tossed something at me. I would have yelled at him to be careful, but when spotting the gift, I was left speechless.

"If you're going to throw it away, do it when I'm not around," he said, acting as if he didn't buy me a simple braided black bracelet with a shark tooth dangling from a silver ring.

The idea that he purchased anything without our parents forcing him to was mind boggling. He walked away when I eagerly slipped the bracelet on. There was little adjustment needed until it hugged my wrist.

The weed was growing; overtaking the garden that never welcomed it to begin with.

I rushed after him with a wide grin, as if I somehow forgot the embarrassment of earlier. "Beau, wait up!"

He didn't wait up.

"Why are you rushing?" I tugged on his arm. He shifted away from me.
"Are you embarrassed?"

"Devin."

"Hmm?"

"Shut the fuck up."

I did no such thing; not once for the entire afternoon spent meandering through shops, poking fun on crowded streets and sharing laughs with an enemy that didn't feel so much like an enemy anymore. But not quite a friend either.

A dandelion, maybe; a thing of beauty that was meant to be a menace.

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**I sense suppressed feelings are finally surfacing :) What do you think about Beau and Devin's interactions up to this point? Are they finally growing closer? Are their feelings being revealed?
I got the oyster necklace thing and mine ended up having a pearl that was oddly shaped so it didn't fit in my necklace xD**

7

Gwen: Still alive?

Devin: Surprisingly

Anthony: Suppose Beau is the smart one
He wouldn't murder you unless he was absolutely certain he could easily get away with it.

Gwen: Have you had to hang out a lot?
Or are you avoiding each other?

Niel: I bet it's super awkward to face him in the mornings after the hate fucks every night ;D

Devin: Niel, when I get back, I'm showing your mom your internet browsing history.

Anthony: Funniest part is, Niel is too stupid to understand how to erase it all together

Niel: Fuck you guys, just cause it's the 21st century that don't mean we're all tech savvy
Spare me >.<

Devin: Back to Gwen though
We've been hanging out actually

Gwen: Oh, so Devin is really dead and this is Beau using his phone?

Devin: No, shut up, listen, he hasn't been a complete ass and we've managed to hang out. Actually, we're going to drive around together today. There's supposedly a bunch of super old houses nearby that are, like, big ass mansions so we wanna see them!

Anthony: You're willingly hanging out?

Yeah, Devin is definitely dead and this is Beau horribly trying to cover it up. I misjudged you. You're an idiot too.

Niel: I won't tattle if you give me that fancy camera of yours, Beau

Devin: Screw all of you guys. I'm getting off and heading out so ttyl

Gwen: Bye Beau! Hide Devin's body well!

With an annoyed huff, my so-called friends were cut off from me for the day. I wasn't lying when I told them that Beau and I had plans, ones that we made ourselves. Shocker!

I caught him scouring his phone last night for other places to visit. He had made no mention of heading out of town to me nor to our parents based on my not having heard of the possible lone Beau adventure. A few annoying questions and wrestling over his phone later, we "decided" to take the van together to investigate the local area. Based on his research, there were plenty of old manors nearby that had been here for ages. He wanted to see if he could get the town on camera while I just wanted to see fancy houses.

My phone was stashed away in the pockets of my basketball shorts when Beau returned to our hotel room with car keys in hand.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yep!"

Yet again, the camera bag was slung over his shoulder. I barely caught the keys tossed my way. I glowered at his smirk, knowing damn well that he intentionally aimed for my face. Probably payback for the volleyball incident because he was a petty bitch like that, but I actually caught the keys so, HA!

"The folks don't wanna tag along?" I slipped on a pair of sneakers along with my trusty baseball cap. Beau kept the door open until I bounced my way out of the room.

"No. They want to take a trip to Portland Head Lighthouse tomorrow so they would rather spend today on the beach."

"All they do is burn on their beach towels and drink."

"All you do is burn in the ocean and be annoying."

"Says the one taking pictures all day when we're meant to be on vacation."

The day was like all the ones before; sunny and humid. The asphalt radiated heat. Crack an egg in the parking lot and breakfast would be done in minutes. I threw the driver door open. Beau slid into the passenger seat. He dug out his camera when I revved up the engine.

"How much time have you spent in the ocean anyways?" I asked.

His answer was a nonchalant shrug.

"And what the hell is Portland Head Lighthouse?"

"You aren't *that* stupid," he deadpanned.

"I know it's a lighthouse, but why specifically go there?"

We backed out of the lot with no real destination, only a direction. Beau knew that we had to take the east road out of town so east it was, moving slowly initially with all the traffic around the beach. Tourists crowded the streets while their cars wandered their way through unfamiliar roads.

"It's the oldest lighthouse in Maine," he explained.

"How do you know that?"

"Google."

"And why did you google it?"

"I like knowing what I'm about to photograph," he said while we headed to unknown locations to see random places that he couldn't possibly know

anything about...unless he did? I didn't really get how he could find information on likely family owned homes, but if he did then that's weird and I wanted to go. There was possibly a serial killer in the car with me! Abort mission!

The tourist filled town faded from view. Once rows upon rows of hotels and restaurants morphed into old homes. Beau instructed which direction to head in, leading us through mostly suburban areas until we came upon them; towering manors within wide gated yards. Some were three stories high and stretched as wide as the beach hotels with columns holding up exquisite awnings. No doubt the owners were rich or the homes passed down from generation to generation. Some were almost regal, sitting atop lush green grass with an air of elegance that I expected the queen of England herself to step out of the double doors. Others were almost friendly in nature with brightly colored panels and giant rose gardens with braided vines crawling up shutters and over window sills.

The views were oddly satisfying. I thought we'd get bored after a few minutes, but we drove around town admiring the homes that were grand compared to our small town. A few were historical sites that allowed us to park on the side of the road. I waited with the van, leaning against the warm metal door while Beau traversed the open areas to discover the best shot. He often grimaced, angry with himself over the photographs that weren't up to his incredibly high standards. However, when he got the perfect picture, he glistened as brightly as freshly polished glass.

I didn't mind basically being his chauffeur until he ordered, "Turn around!"

"Huh?"

"Turn around." He violently twisted in his seat. "There was a good spot back there."

"Where?" I asked, recalling the area we drove through. There were personal homes on one side and a cemetery on the other.

"The cemetery."

I choked on my own spit. "Excuse you?"

"Just turn around."

"You want to take pictures in a cemetery?"

"I will get out at the next damn stop light," he warned.

I gaped at his unusually childish nature, but he wasn't giving up. At the next light, I reluctantly changed directions to slowly enter the old cemetery that...ok, was pretty damn neat looking.

The gates were towering iron, encircling old tombstones that were oddly shaped or discolored from age. Strange bushes that were about as tall as me were sprinkled through the yard; gnarled branches and deep purple leaves. A white gazebo encompassed by a prismatic garden rested to the right. To the left was Beau's desired destination; a church that had been long forgotten.

We traversed the maze of paths to get close to the structure that was slowly being overtaken by nature. At first glance, the siding was likely once white but had worn ashen gray. Aged wood reached to the sky from the caved in porch possessed by weeds, flowers, vines and grass. The panels of wood were mostly hidden beneath moss and ivy that stretched all the way to the roof. A circular window sat in the point of the roof, star shaped and dirty with age.

Beau was going crazy.

"Your enthusiasm to take pictures of an old church in a cemetery is somewhat concerning," I remarked to the boy that didn't give a damn based on his continued enthusiasm. I slipped my hands into my pockets, refusing to admit that I was smiling. "What are you going to do? Post these online so everyone knows we entered a cemetery for pictures?"

"Who cares? It's a beautiful structure, even you can't deny that," he easily argued, taking a break to click through the photographs.

"I guess it looks kinda nice. Creepy, but nice." Until zombies broke their way through the decrepit structure and ate our brains.

"Come here." Beau waved me over.

"Why?"

"To get a picture."

"With the church?"

"No, with Satan," he quipped. "Yes, with the church, dumb ass."

"Why?"

He scowled. "Whatever, don't then."

Beau returned to the lone photoshoot; only there was a sudden tension. The air sizzled. Beneath the summer sun, we both were sweating buckets, yet, I wasn't so certain that was what made him so heated. Sighing, I meandered over until we stood side by side. He gave me a once over, speaking a silent question.

"I'm here," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Don't bother," he chastised. "I don't want to listen to you complain."

"I won't. I will be your model for the day!" I stepped in front of the camera. Said camera lowered, revealing Beau's vexed eyes. "You should be honored. Post pictures of me anywhere and they're bound to be a hit."

Although if he photographed himself, they would probably do even better. He had the features for it while I was a lumbering basketball player that easily fell into the rugged athletic category. I had limbs for days.

"Fine," he huffed.

He dragged his new model into position. I was posed around the church in whatever way he saw fit. Modeling seemed easy enough until I realized

what that meant; Beau's unwavering attention. Before the lens, I wasn't Devin and that showed in his quiet and contemplative stares. He was fixated on me, the way I looked, the way I stood to how I held myself. I was a prop that he had no issue guiding this way and that while I had a lot of problems with it.

We were too close. His eyes were too bright, too round and attentive. His lips looked soft, almost inviting. His breaths were warm. Sweat clung to his skin so that it sparkled as if embedded with shards of glass that threatened to cut if I got too close. His hands weren't smooth like porcelain, although they certainly looked the part. They were as rough as my own, calloused from many years of sports and rough housing. His touch wasn't gentle because I wasn't certain he really knew what gentle meant. He tugged or shoved or dragged me around yet the brush of his fingers over my blazing skin left sensations in their wake that I rather not think about.

Luckily, the torment of my senses ended when Beau deemed this area done. If Model Devin bothered him even a little, he didn't show it. His fixation was on the pictures that he was mumbling about on the way back to the car. My fixation was on so much more.

"Where to next?" I asked once we returned to the air conditioned van. I think we both heaved a sigh of relief. Beau even fanned his shirt. I refused to let my eyes drift to his exposed abdomen.

"Are you hungry?" He questioned.

The clock stated that we had actually been aimlessly driving and taking pictures for a little over three hours. To answer his question, my stomach growled.

He chuckled. "Food it is."

Beau recalled spotting a restaurant earlier that "piqued his interest." The phrasing had me rolling my eyes, but I followed the brief directions he gave. On the drive, he didn't speak much and that bothered me. We were alone and being civil, for once. We had more in common than expected and...and I wanted to know. I wanted to know more about him; what a

stupid thought. Even if we weren't friends, we already knew so much about each other.

But I wanted more. I was growing more greedy by the day.

"You never answered the question," I said, earning Beau's unwavering attention yet again. I hated how I had been craving it lately.

"What?"

"If you ever dated before, you never answered."

He was taken aback enough to let the facade slip. He pursed his lips, eyes as wide as a kid's in a candy store. Then they drew away, as did his demeanor when leaning his body against the door. "Maybe I didn't answer because I didn't want to."

"Why not? We have each other to talk to now."

"That doesn't mean I want to talk."

His admission stung enough to entice a flinch. The reaction didn't go unnoticed.

"I didn't mean that," he blurted out.

I flexed my fingers against the wheel. "What did you mean then?"

Beau combed back his untamable mane. "I don't get why you're asking. We were never interested in each other before so why bother acting like we are now?"

"Not interested in each other?" I somehow half laughed and half snorted. He mumbled out more directions until I said, "Now you're the one being an idiot. We're constantly interested, only most of the time it's not for very good reasons. Tell me right now that you know anyone better than you know me."

He didn't accept the challenge because we both knew that, even after all the shit we talked, we knew each other better than anyone else. We knew each other's interests and their fears. That was what happened when you grew up together, when your lives have been so intertwined that it was hard to imagine a life without each other.

And yet that would be the case in only a few months. A few days ago I relished in the thought; now I wasn't so sure how I felt.

"Fine," he moaned. "I'll answer if you answer."

"You know I've dated."

"Only Stacia?"

"Yep."

"And did you...actually like her or...how did that work?" Beau practically whispered that out. He bit his lip afterwards when I howled in laughter.

"You never sounded so awkward in your whole life!"

"How else am I meant to ask?"

I would have answered, but I was too busy laughing.

He waved me off, grumbling, "Forget it then."

"No, no, it's fine."

We pulled into the parking lot. Neither of us exited the vehicle though considering the topic of conversation.

"Uh, honestly, I really did like Stacia, a lot. With, um, with my sexuality I've found that I only enjoy the sexual aspects with those I already have a bond with. It's, well—" I twiddled with my thumbs in my lap, scowling. "Sometimes I feel...disgusting."

"Why?" he asked.

At that moment, I realized that I was wrong earlier. Beau could be gentle. I saw it before on the beach. I was seeing it again in the car. His voice was faint and encouraging. It was a question that I could answer or drop.

Never in a million years did I imagine I would be speaking about this with Beau. Never in a million years did I think I would care about what he had to say.

"Because I only ever think about friends," I answered with downcast eyes. "I can't imagine a stranger or a celebrity and, I don't know, I wonder how only a friend would feel knowing that I was thinking of them or dreamed of them. If they knew, would they be disgusted? Would they feel betrayed?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, that didn't make sense."

"It did, and it's nothing to feel disgusting for. You clearly value your friends and don't view them as sex objects. It just is what it is. I'm not much different." Beau shrugged. "I felt disgusted when thinking of guys, especially those I crushed on that thought we were only friends. I get it."

I get it ; who knew three simple words could mean so much.

Beau stepped out of the car without another word, ending the conversation as quick as it started. I meekly followed until we were sitting in a booth with menus in hand. Our server got our drinks, giving us a few more minutes to decide on our lunch.

"I had one boyfriend," Beau spoke out of the blue.

I nearly spilled my entire glass of pop. Beau cursed when an ice cube slid into his lap.

"Sorry, I was surprised," I admitted around nervous laughter that didn't help lessen the intense heat pouring from his stern scrutiny. "So, uh...you aren't dating this boyfriend anymore?"

He shook his head. "Broke up about five months ago."

"Really?"

Unfortunately, there could be many memories pointing to Beau's secretive boyfriend or none at all. We hung out because of our parents, but it also wasn't unusual to find ways out of the forced encounters. How many of them had more to do with Beau wanting to spend time with his boyfriend and how many were an attempt to not see me?

"Who was it?" I tried, grinning at his eye roll.

"None of your business."

"Boo, you're no fun."

"You should know that by now."

Peering over the menu, I caught his smirk; not taunting or one of annoyance, but of shared enjoyment. My palms were sweaty and it had nothing to do with the humidity.

I set the menu aside, crossed arms perched on the table. "Can I ask why you broke up then?"

"You already did," he claimed. Rather than speak, I waited with skittish and impatient movements. "We just didn't work out."

"Because you didn't like each other or another reason?"

"Plenty of reasons."

I snapped my fingers. "Ah, so it was a bad break up."

"Are any break ups good?"

"I wouldn't say mine was bad. Stacia and I broke up because she moved so far away, not because we stopped liking each other."

He gave a slow nod. Our server returned to take our orders. As usual, Beau ordered some sort of chicken meal. I would have complained about his childish palette yet again, but we had been on a role with this civility the last few days. I rather not ruin the record over chicken.

Although the discussion of dating ended there, that didn't mean we were silent throughout the rest of lunch. In fact, there was quite a lot of talking and teasing. Shared laughs over our senior year, going over our plans for college that left a sinking sensation in my gut, even discussing the pro's and con's of our beach vacation; normal conversations between two that once struggled to do more than argue.

We were changing. We had been changing since day one. With forced cohabitation, no friends to tease us or prove ourselves to, after accidentally discovering then honestly sharing secrets, the fragile bond between us strengthened to almost fearful proportions. No longer was it a mere string that binds us, but rather a bridge that neither of us expected to build let alone cross.

Our feelings had much different plans though, and they didn't care if we were ready to catch up.

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Beau and Devin had a day out on their own and it turned out great! They even shared a bit about their past relationships :D What's going to happen next between these two?

Here's a picture of the church! I only found one. I think I deleted the others cause they weren't that great, but it was very pretty!



8

Game of Thrones was right. The night is long and full of terror.

In my case, terror came in the form of a quiet blonde that, to no fault of his own, was far too close for my insane mind to handle. Yet again, I managed to invade Beau's side of the bed. Dark lashes contrasted against full pale cheeks. There was the faintest sign of a shadow on his chin.

Any movement resulted in a quiet hum or minuscule twitch from the resting danger. Worrying over my bottom lip, I contemplated the right move; drag myself away and in doing so wake Beau, who would certainly tease me, or torture myself by laying there. Oddly enough, the decision was too difficult to make. Turning away resulted in more yearning for the warmth that he unknowingly gave.

Sleep eluded me that evening. I only chanced moving away when his alarm went off, signaling that we would leave for Portland Head Lighthouse soon.

If he thought anything of my back facing him, certainly closer than when we went to sleep, he said nothing of it. I pretended to sleep for about five minutes before he kicked me. I was grateful for the rough housing; made me believe nothing had changed when my heart was arguing that, little by little, my whole world had become as turbulent as the sea outside the door.

Not long after waking, we met up with our parents. Mom and Aunt Zoey were driving, claiming that after my dad's mishap on the drive here, they weren't willing to risk turning a twenty minute drive into a three hour one.

With my new set of headphones, I ignored Beau during the drive.

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"Here we are!" Mom announced when we came upon a road that seemingly led to nowhere.

Popping out a headphone, I searched for the supposed lighthouse only to see the shoreline and a small parking lot. To the left there was a stretch of land with an old military bunker. The structure was left in our rearview mirror as we continued on. Mom followed the road further up a steep hill. There were two more parking lots. She drove through both then found a spot.

"The lighthouse should be right over the hill," Aunt Zoey claimed when clambering out of the car.

I was already on the move.

"Are you running off without us again!?" Mom hollered.

"You old folks are too slow for my taste!" I taunted. Mom's shout faded into the distance.

The grass had been freshly cut. The heady scent mixed in with that of sea salt. Ocean waves crashed against an unseen shore.

Beau jogged to meet me. I broke into a run, smiling when his footsteps mirrored my own. He never caught up. I was always faster, but we still raced over a hill, down an asphalt road, and past other tourists that laughed at two overzealous teens. We rounded a bend where the road led to a roundabout.

Portland Head Lighthouse sat at the far end on the cliffside. The white house was well kept with pale green molding and a soft brown tiled roof. Behind the house was the actual light tower, made of white brick, reaching into the sky. Two smaller buildings sat on the property, both the same in color. Brown posts with wired fences encircled the area, keeping the tourists from the cliffside of jagged rocks and foaming waves below.

"Fort Williams," Beau read. He stood in front of a green sign, slightly battered up with chipped paint. Next to the sign was a rusted bell in the grass, and a few benches. "This former military installation, begun in 1873 and known as The Battle of Portland Head, was a subpost of Fort Preble until 1898 when it became a separate independent fort."

"An independent fort?" I hummed. "Suppose that's why there's that old fort thingy that we passed on the way in here."

"Old fort thingy?" He snorted.

"I don't know what the hell it's called."

"I'm assuming it's called a fort since it's, y'know, a fucking fort."

"I'm assuming it's called a fort," I mocked, attempting to smack him upside the head. He easily dodged then spoke over me.

"It was designated Fort Williams in honor of—" He squinted his eyes at the chipped paint. "That word is too ruined to make out—"

"Thanks for the clarification. I obviously can't see that myself."

"Major General Seth Williams, a native of Maine, and Assistant Adjutant General, U.S. Army. This coastal defense installation guarded the entrance of Casco Bay and was the headquarters for the harbor defenses of Portland. It remained an active military base until it was closed in 1964."

Digging a pinky into my ear, I hissed, "Loved that you read all that like I give a shit."

"Why did you stand around to listen then?"

"Thought I'd humor you."

He elbowed me in the gut then walked away.

Our parents took their time catching up. Beau and I were already jogging over to the lighthouse. There was a sign next to a path explaining that there's a road to take along the cliffside that leads to the parking lot we passed on the way in. I made a mental note to inspect the path later.

"Wow!" Mom whistled behind us. "How gorgeous! Devin, come here and let me take some pictures."

I groaned. "This ain't a photoshoot."

"Come here."

I wasn't going to argue with that tone. Model Devin returned, only that time it was for my parents. We all got some in front of the lighthouse, along the fence lines, and, of course, our parents forced Beau and I together. We stood side by side, forcing smiles in front of the lighthouse.

"Stop frowning like that!" Mom ordered. "You've been having a blast this whole trip together and you know it."

"Not together," I corrected her. "I did almost break his nose, remember?"

Mom went red. I shouldn't have brought that up!

Before she started ranting, I threw my arm around Beau's shoulders. He grunted when I hugged him into my side and smiled, hissing between clenched teeth, "Smile, jackass, or I'll kill you the moment we're alone."

He rolled his eyes, but put on a smile.

I was spared since Mom got a "cute" picture. The moment she got it, I lept away to go off on my own. The less time I spent with Beau the better, especially when my heart refused to beat properly.

I didn't realize how big the actual light tower was until I stood next to it. My neck ached from peering up. Behind the light house, the moon sat in a clear blue sky. Not a single cloud was in sight. The lighthouse wasn't what kept my attention though. It was the view.

The beach was calm and serene while the cliffside was fiercely beautiful. Jagged rocks littered the shoreline where waves roared and twisted into bubbling white waves. Even nature was fearful of the shore, creeping over rocks but never too close to the treacherous ocean. The water was dark blue, consuming the warm sunlight. Every direction I went, the view was breathtaking. Walking around the back of the lighthouse to the opposing side, admiring the ocean and the boats out at sea.

Click.

I turned, sneering at Beau lingering behind me with camera in hand. My breath caught in my throat when I realized the scenery was dull in comparison to him.

Click.

"Shouldn't you be taking pictures of the ocean?" I teased, or maybe pleaded. The thought that it was me he was taking a picture of rather than the amazing view left a strange hope warming my chest.

He didn't answer, only joined me. Standing there, a warm arm brushing my own, had me thinking that, in only a few months, I wouldn't feel this again. Our vacation would end. Summer would end. Beau would leave. No more multiple conjoined family dinners every week. No more game nights on Fridays. No more shared holidays. No more forced birthday invitations. No more bickering at school.

No more Beau Young. Like I wanted...

"Nice view," I said.

"Mhm."

"Will you miss it?" I asked.

He shifted next to me. "The ocean? Yeah."

"No, home."

Our arms brushed when Beau leaned forward. I barely caught his gaze out of my peripheral vision. I wasn't sure where I was going with this, and if I had then maybe I wouldn't have asked.

"When you leave for school, will you miss it? Our little town of Graysbury sitting in the middle of nowhere with only a run down grocery bag, a mediocre park, and a dirty river to entertain us."

"I probably will, eventually." He snorted. "Not really the town I'll miss though."

"Your parents?"

He nodded. "And friends, Aunt Chelsea and Uncle Martin too, of course."

"Not me though."

Those words hung in the air, as if they were a threat. My hands clenched until my knuckles were white as snow. I refused to face him, not even when he breathed my name, "Devin?"

"There's a path along the cliffside." I pushed off the fence. "Probably has a nice view too."

He gripped my arm. "Dev—"

I pulled away, trudging along to the path I noted earlier.

Then I ran.

The path was a wave of its own, no more than an old, uneven bike trail. A measly wire fence kept tourists safe from the uneven cliffside. Soft showers of water wafted up with the wind from below. I tasted the sea, only coming to a stop when spotting a fork in the trail. One way led further down the shoreline, the other was a set of steps to a small rocky beach.

I took one step down. The dirt was wet. My foot sank. I fell forward. There was a bruising hold on my arm. I was dragged back, tumbling into someone's arms.

"Watch where you're going!" Beau grunted. Warm breath tickled the back of my ear. There was something equally as warm beneath me, his lap, which I was sitting in. We fell onto the trail when he rescued me from my own stupidity.

He glared. "Are you an idiot? You could have smashed your head in!"

I wriggled out of his grasp.

"Devin!" He shouted.

My stubborn self continued the trek down the lumpy stairs. Tense fingers clung to the dirt until it stained my nails. There was rummaging behind me, signaling that he followed. I moved faster. The ground was unsteady. Damp. Rocks and shells crunched beneath my feet. I kicked a rock into the water. Another. Then another.

"What are you doing?" Beau sighed.

I didn't answer.

"Are you really giving me the silent treatment?"

I kicked a chunk of dirt with the next rock. I hoped it would take a little bit of me with it. Let these feelings sink into the sea. Crush them with pressure. Disappear into the dark. Take them away to where I wouldn't face them again.

"Why are you acting like this?" His voice was suddenly right beside me. I jumped away, but his abrupt hold was firm. Fingers twisted into my shirt then slipped onto my bicep, keeping me in place. "What you said earlier—"

"Forget it." I tried to brush away his hold. He only replaced it with another. "I was just running off at the mouth, ok?"

"Bullshit." He was searching for something, eyes boring into my own. I never felt more exposed. "Why are you suddenly acting like you don't want me to go?"

His grip tightened when I tried to escape. His tone was sharp, accusatory. "You are the one that's been the most vocal about how damn happy you are that I'm leaving. What changed?"

"I don't fucking know, ok?!" I shoved him. I didn't know what else to do. Or I was scared of what I wanted to do.

There was too much in my mind at once. Childhood memories of us staying up all night challenging the other to check for a monster under the bed. Long days spent at the park, sneakers crunching against asphalt, our labored breaths under the summer sun. Cooling off at the river, laying on the muddy bank, him laughing when I thought I saw a snake and jumped probably ten feet in the air. Dressing up on Halloween and eating candy until we were sick. Taking notes for him in class when he missed and claiming all his good grades were thanks to me because of it. Him calling me an idiot while teaching me math for days on end, only for me to barely pass when the test came around.

All these little instances of us that built up to so much more.

All these little instances of us that would eventually be no more.

I knew I wasn't walking the path alone. Beau was only a few steps behind. His gaze seared into my back, but we never spoke a word. Not even when we came across the path to the fort we passed on the way in. Trees lined either side, closing us in until we reached another cliffside where the old, abandoned fort sat covered in graffiti and rust.

The fort had open bunkers, only one was shut with clasped iron doors. Rust ate away at the hinges. Within the bunkers there was graffiti and broken bottles. Signs of parties likely from the locals. Steps led to a second level where the windows had iron fences at eye level. One could rest in there and see far out to sea. There was a lone bunker on the side, closest to the ocean. I crawled to get inside. It was too small for anyone to stand in so I sat drawing shapes into the dirt even when Beau silently joined me.

We were alone. Sitting on a dirt floor. Surrounded by rusted fences, crumbling stone and colorful graffiti. A lock hung on the fence. Sunlight cascaded in; orange, red, and yellow. Like fire against Beau's pale skin. Like the fire in his hand that crept over my own, linking our fingers.

I didn't pull away. I didn't admit to myself why. I wondered if Beau knew.

Were we the same? Was I Beau's dandelion? A weed he couldn't rip out.

I hoped so.

"I'll miss you," he spoke softly.

I was going to call him a liar, but couldn't bring myself to do it when met with a firm green gaze. One that was too close and too far all at the same time.

"I'll miss you the most, Devin," he repeated, like he honestly didn't think I heard him the first time. Like he had no idea what he was doing to me.

When he leaned in, the sun cast fire in his eyes. And when I leaned in, I let that fire burn me with a kiss. A kiss locked in a bunker by the sea. The taste of salt. The metallic smell of rust. Beau's soft lips. His hand in mine.

We thought we could leave it behind, but our hands held tight on the silent walk back to the car.

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Well, that was quite an adventure, wasn't it? Devin worked up the courage to ask Beau if he'd miss him after he left. He got a pretty interesting answer, didn't he? Did you expect our boys to kiss so soon? What will happen now?

I honestly took a lot of pictures at the lighthouse because the scenery was so gorgeous and, no, the pictures do not do it justice. I didn't want to bombard you guys with photographs though so here's only a few!



9

My sneakers beat against the pavement; the basketball snug in the palm of my hand. Clouds blocked the sun. Sweat stuck to my skin. The court was empty save for me. Fellow tourists wandered past, dressed in bathing suits and clicking flip flops. There were kids giggling on the playground across the yard. Their parents sat on the grass or at picnic benches with their lunch. My parents likely weren't much different on the beach. They asked me to join them, but I couldn't stand the sight of the color green.

Something was off. But not this. Not basketball. I've been playing since Dad bought me my first basketball when I was four. We had one of those small plastic hoops that I played with for hours. Then I started watching games, perched on the couch with popcorn in hand, shouting at ref's or admiring the moves of professionals that I could only ever dream of mimicking.

Basketball was familiar. I needed familiar now more than ever.

Rushing down the court. Jumping until my legs ached. Hearing the net. Running after the ball. Hitting the backboard. Then falling on the cool grass, breathing heavy under a sometimes blue, sometimes murky sky. The game, whether it was against others or only with myself, let my mind ease. When I stopped moving though, thoughts krept in.

Memories of a bunker by the sea. The sound of the ocean. The warmth between two. The musty scent of rust and sweat. Smooth lips and green; eyes of jade, cool and alluring.

We went to bed like nothing happened, but so much had happened.

I pressed my palms against my eyes. "Damn it."

My phone rang. I welcomed the distraction that Anthony gave; "Hey, you're still alive!"

"Still alive," I breathed, strumming my fingers against my chest. "What's up?"

"Just checking in, making sure you aren't dead in a ditch."

"Not yet."

Anthony hesitated. Sometimes he was an annoyance, not because of his quips but due to his uncanny ability to read the room. Even when I was miles away, he sniffed out the issues like a bloodhound.

"Something wrong?" He said more as a statement than a question.

"I'm stuck on vacation with Beau. Everything is wrong."

Anthony guffawed. "Yeah, I got that, but what happened that got you sounding like you just discovered Stranger Things got canceled?"

"Don't even speak such nonsense." I sat up, twirling the basketball between my parted legs. "I just got into a fight with the jerk again. And this time it was me that said some stupid shit."

"This time? Don't you mean all the time?" he teased.

"Screw you."

"What was the fight about?"

That was a loaded question that had an answer I was struggling to admit to, even when I knew how stupid I was being by avoiding the truth.

"This trip is messing with me," I said. "Don't talk to anyone about what I'm going to say, got it?"

"I won't. I promise."

And I knew he would keep that promise. Anthony was many things, a total fool at times, but he was loyal. I needed loyal too; a loyal friend to talk to before I went mad. Sanity was being washed away by ocean waves.

"I've been thinking about how he's going to leave when summer ends," I whispered. "Do I sound like an idiot for lingering on how everything is going to change? We aren't young enough to believe life will remain the same after graduation anymore so I thought I was fine, but apparently I'm not."

"That's understandable," he says seriously. "You've been friends your whole life."

"Friends? Can you call us that?"

"Yeah, what else would you be? We all know the so-called hatred you have for each other is just a ruse. If you actually hated each other, you wouldn't hang out at all."

"Our parents force us to."

"Do they?" Anthony challenged, but his tone was soft, not meant to antagonize me. "They set up times to hang out. Yeah, maybe a lecture here or there, but if you didn't actually want to go then they wouldn't make you. Both of you use your parents as an excuse to go because you're too stubborn to admit that you like each other."

"W-Who said anything about l-liking each other?!"

"Whoa, calm down." He chuckled. "Reacting like that makes me a bit suspicious, did something else happen?"

"No!"

A lot had happened. So much in such a short time that catching my breath wasn't even a possibility. The world I had always known changed in less than a week.

"Ok, ok," he speaks calmly, like a parent trying to calm their crying child. "I meant you two are too stubborn to admit you're friends. When he gets sick, you find some dumb reason to go over and visit him. When you go off and do something stupid, he follows you to make sure you're ok—"

Memories of the lighthouse returned. Beau followed me down the beaten path, lecturing me about getting hurt. He had done it before, done it all my life. When I wrecked my bike, he was there to lecture me for going too fast. When I sprained my ankle, he was there to make sure I didn't make it worse by continuing to practice.

He was my shadow and I was his, whether we wanted to admit it or not.

"Someone like that suddenly leaving, it would upset anyone," Anthony added. "Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed."

"Nothing to be confused about then."

"I asked him if he'd miss me then stormed off because he hesitated to answer," I admitted, biting my lip at Anthony's silence.

"So he did answer?" He hummed. "What did he say?"

It was my turn to hesitate. "He said he'd miss me the most," I whispered, surprised he even heard me.

"And now you're freaking out about it."

"I'm not freaking out, I'm—"

"Confused, yes, all back to confusion to maintain your pride, ok, moving on!" Anthony bellowed. I envisioned him waving his hand through the air. "What's the issue with that? Do you not like the idea of him missing you because it goes against your status quo?"

"I hate that you're so calm about this," I groaned, rolling onto my stomach. I perched my chin atop the basketball, barely balancing myself.

What I hated more was how on the nose he was. Wasn't it natural to dislike change? And this was a massive change to something I expected was set in stone.

"You're only talking to me because I'm the calm one. I should be a therapist." He snickered.

"You're too annoying."

"I'm about to cancel your appointment if you keep this up. I have more pressing clients than you."

"Yeah, yeah."

Silence enveloped us. My eyes scanned the horizon either in search of Beau or hoping to never find him.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I admit with an audible breath. "I don't know what I want to do or how I'm meant to feel or what I'm meant to say. I just don't know."

Anthony hummed, mulling over my admission for a minute or so. "Well, why don't you talk to Beau?"

"Huh?"

"About school, about change. You're alone on vacation. Now is the best time to have a little heart to heart—"

Or lips to lips, apparently.

"Take the opportunity and roll with it. Sometimes the best plan is to not have a plan at all!" He laughed, probably in hopes to diffuse the tension.

"That's easier said than done."

"Never said it was easy, but it's worth a shot now, isn't it?"

Maybe.

Or maybe I was already lost.

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Talking always sounded easy. Talking has always been easy. Open your mouth and words came out, and yet, when returning to the hotel that night, I forgot the purpose and meaning of words. All became lodged in my throat the moment Beau's gaze caught mine from where he sat on the bed, one leg dangling over the edge. The light of his phone illuminated his features, casting shadow beneath his chiseled jaw and brightening his pink lips. The ones that I vividly remembered the feeling of.

Anthony said to talk. I was too scared to talk, but Beau wasn't.

"Where did you run off to all day?"

I took his question as an assault, snarling under my breath, "None of your damn business."

Regret washed over me in an instant, crushing under Beau's scrutiny.

"Whatever." He huffed, returning to his phone.

Tension was not a foreign sensation between us, yet what hung in the air sent chills down my spine. Even beneath the brutally heated water of the shower, a cold nip bit at my exposed skin. Skin that broke out in goosebumps when stepping out of the bathroom minutes later to, once again, find Beau peering my way. Only for a moment though.

He watched TV, not paying me any mind while I slid into my side of the bed. This wasn't what I wanted, but I wasn't all that certain what I wanted.

"Sorry," I blurted out, refusing to face Beau even when the mattress creaked with his movements. "E-Earlier, I didn't mean to snap at you. I, uh, I was at the courts, playing basketball."

He hummed.

"What did you do...today?"

"Took pictures," he answered.

"Ah, I guess...I guess that should have been obvious."

"Yeah."

My mouth ran off without my consent, speaking a truth that I had yet to admit even to myself; "I'll miss you too."

Beau was quiet. His actions were not. Moving over the bed so that he was next to me.

"When you go to school," I explained as if I even needed to.

A gentle touch to my cheek and I was faced with the same green I had been trying to erase all day. Instead, I drowned in jade.

Beau's lips met mine. He smelled of apple shampoo and tasted of mint. Fingers ran through my hair, resting on the back of my neck when our chests met. I pulled him closer, clinging to his hips, fingers brushing beneath his shirt, testing the warm skin beneath.

Beau always drove me wild, but I never expected for that meaning to change. Or maybe I never wanted to admit that there was always more to that meaning to begin with.

My back met the mattress. Beau's body slipped between my thighs, one hand resting on my tense muscles. We kissed like it was air and we had been drowning. From a gentle peck to desperate, breathy and fast. Every suppressed sensation through the years bubbled over, reminding me of every instance where my eyes lingered or my mind drifted.

Was Beau the same? Was this yet another thing we had in common?

A knock rapped at the door, breaking us apart in a deep breath of panic. Beau practically threw himself out of the bed when his mom's voice called out, "Boys, you awake?"

Awake was putting it lightly.

Beau fixed his shirt that I had unknowingly dragged up his back. I buried myself beneath the blankets, refusing to face Aunt Zoey when the door opened. Somehow, guilt bubbled in my chest.

"We just wanted to stop and remind you two that we have to check out of here at eleven tomorrow," she said. "Make sure all your things are packed. We'll put everything in the car, but we won't leave the beach until probably two or three, ok?"

"Got it," said Beau.

"Are you ok, sweetie? Your face is a little red."

"Maybe I got a little burnt today," he lied smoothly. "I'm fine, Mom."

"Ok then, goodnight. Goodnight Devin!"

"Night," I called, nearly biting through my bottom lip.

Aunt Zoey left. She took the moment with her.

We went to sleep acting as if earlier never happened. What a load of bullshit we were feeding to ourselves.

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Beau and I acted like our last night at Maine was a curse. Mention it and we'd all die. So we didn't mention it, didn't even talk. We silently got into the van when the time came to head for Connecticut. We'd reach the hotel around nightfall, so Uncle David claimed.

"Everyone ready to go?" Dad called from the front seat.

A series of nods and quiet "yeah's" passed through the car. Then we were off, continuing our journey to the next destination. Supposedly another beach with a lot of seashells that our mom's were super excited about.

The ride began much like our vacation did; Beau and I on opposite sides of the car, headphones in and gazes fixated out the window. But this ride differed in the sense that, it seemed, neither of us could keep our eyes to ourselves.

A brief glance where I caught Beau staring at me. Then minutes later he caught my staring. A game of tag where we continuously caught one another but never called the game off. Not until Beau's hand grazed my own. Then my pinky linked with his. Then our fingers intertwined, hands clasped in the empty space between us while we both acted like nothing had changed. That our actions were completely normal and there wasn't a spark on the verge of bursting into an inferno.

What were we doing? Where did we plan for this to go? Or was Anthony right, the best kind of plan was to have none at all? We would enjoy the journey while hoping for a pleasant destination, but hope was for children, wasn't it?

"That beach was lovely!" Aunt Zoey squealed, her voice carrying over the music drifting through my headphones. "We'll have to visit again, what do you boys think?"

She threw a look over her shoulder. Our hands swiftly broke apart.

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun," I admitted, almost ashamed that my thoughts were on anything but the beach. I couldn't stop thinking about the kiss or how badly I wanted to hold Beau's hand.

"I'm so happy we made some great memories this summer," said Mom, completely oblivious to what her words meant to me, or, apparently to us. When I looked at Beau, I found him staring right back at me.

Memories, yeah, those were certainly made. And they were going to continue to be made, seeing as the moment Aunt Zoey turned away, Beau's hand swiftly took my own. Did he feel my hand shaking? Or was I feeling his hands shake? I kind of hoped it was my imagination, or maybe a small earthquake.

The most exciting part of our travels was when we stopped for food prior to checking in at our next hotel. For thirty excruciating minutes, we were tormented by our parents arguing.

"We are here on vacation and you want to get the same damn thing as you get back home," Mom argued, red-faced and agitated.

"You're acting like we've gone to a different country. There's nothing different here than back home!" Dad exclaimed, waving frantically to our surroundings that, honestly, were no different than home. Not that I would voice such an opinion, fearful of Mom's wrath.

"There's nothing special that I can find," said Uncle David. His phone was out, scrolling through a search of local restaurants. "There's an authentic chinese place, apparently, but the price is pretty high."

"I'd rather go to someplace more casual," Aunt Zoey chimed in, viewing the restaurant choices by glancing over Uncle David's shoulder.

"Boys." Mom turned. Beau and I separated once again, both of us blinking innocently at her. "What are you in the mood for?"

Beau shrugged, leaving our fate to me. What a jerk!

"Uh...I don't really...care," I answered honestly. At that point I was famished and just wanted some damn food. Of course, Mom didn't take kindly to my lack of a response and, rather than notice that Beau was no help either, glared at only me.

"Fine, just stop somewhere, Martin." Mom crossed her arms, ending the conversation.

Dad pulled into some chinese chain restaurant, a place that we also had back home, only the one back home had good food. The food there was absolute garbage, tasted like someone left it over hot coals until it burned the flavor out of it.

I inhaled it like a dehydrated fool escaping a desert. Beau curled his nose in disgust across from me.

"What?" I hissed the first words shared since the hotel.

"You're disgusting," he said.

A totally normal remark that I rebutted time and time again, but that day was different.

That day the words sank deep, digging into my consciousness that was already berating me.

I pushed my meal aside. Disgusted. With myself, most of all.

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Aw, Devin, don't be disgusted! D= It's ok to be confused, a lot is going on >.< So what do you guys think of the conversation between Anthony and Devin? What do you think of Beau and Devin's interactions and how Devin is feeling? These poor boys are having their lives flipped upside down when they're meant to be enjoying a vacation!

10

A strange distance continued to permeate between us, courtesy of me. See, I was in a bit of a rut. A rut of my own making, where I laid in dirty thoughts of self-doubt, guilt, and disgust. Guilt that there was anything other than hatred or friendship between Beau and me. Disgust that, perhaps, our parents would find out and the family that we had would be torn to shreds because of me, because of my feelings. Doubting these moments meant anything, or if they should, after all, wasn't this meaningless?

Beau would be gone by the end of August. Attending college ten hours away where he would meet new people, go on new adventures, start a new life without me. What started here would end before we even got a running start so why bother? Why start what we know will fail?

And yet, even with such thoughts, Beau and I still held hands during the car ride to Silver Sands the following morning. We had said nothing last night, and nothing this morning, again.

"How beautiful," said Aunt Zoey when we pulled into the parking lot for Silver Sands, which was drastically different from Old Orchard Beach.

"That's quite a walk," added Uncle David, groaning.

"Oh, shush, we've been lazing around all week! We all need a little walk."

"I don't want a walk," Uncle David groaned louder.

Outside of the car, I got a view of the boardwalk that stretched over high grass to a beach on the horizon. The beach was no more than a speck with the ocean blending into the sky so one couldn't even guess a beach was there.

Mom clapped. "There's meant to be a lot of seashells here!"

"Like the--" I held out my hands, mimicking what I thought the size would be. "Big ones?"

"Conch seashells," Beau elaborated.

"Ah, no, those are south. These are small shells that we're hoping to collect for some crafts later!" Mom grabbed Aunt Zoey, who had retrieved two buckets from the trunk.

"If you two see any that you think are neat, pick them up and bring them to us," Aunt Zoey requested, patting Beau's arm. Then they were off, getting a head start on the rest of us.

I followed, pretending Beau's presence wasn't lagging behind me. The boardwalk was busy with beach goers dressed in bathing suits, sunglasses, and hats. We weren't any different, carrying our belongings under our arms or over our shoulders across the walkway. I was actually shocked by how long it took us to reach the end where the path led us to a literal silver-ish sandy beach.

I balanced on the balls of my feet, pushing through to find scattered pieces of multi-colored shells that, when crushed up, did sparkle silver in color. One couldn't run around barefoot here because there were shells and rocks everywhere, although some chanced it, not me though. My feet would not be torn to shreds, thanks!

The sands along the shoreline were more of a murky brown with green moss, shells that swayed with the waves, and mounds of rock. That didn't make the sight any less striking. Beau agreed in that regard, seeing as he was continuing with his pictures. I caught him again though, focusing on me rather than the beach. I should have told him to pay me for being a model, but all that left my lips was a quiet breath. He froze, slowly lowering his camera. I wasn't sure what to say, so I walked away.

"Let's hurry and take the path out to the island," Dad suggested, gesturing to a stretch of sand that did lead out to an island. "We can't walk across once the tide comes in."

"I wonder if anyone got stuck out here before?" asked Mom, giggling.

"Probably, but let's not add our names to the list!" said Aunt Zoey.

I was up for an adventure, especially when my head had been spinning since yesterday. Anything to distract me was a blessing. The water here was darker, more murky, although the beach wasn't as crowded as the last. Either way, the view was gorgeous, surrounded by sea on either side while heading out to the small island. Beau was never far behind. A shadow. My shadow, as he always had been, but wouldn't always be.

"Fuck," I hissed under my breath, willing the thoughts away. Thoughts didn't care about will though. They lingered.

On the island, there was a patch of wooded area at the center, some grass, brush, and trees encircled by sand. I meandered away from the group, resting along the shore where the ocean came up to drift over my ankles. The water was warm, tickled my toes while the seabreeze sprinkled water against my warm cheeks. Apparently my plan was popular because Beau sat next to me.

Out of my peripheral, I noted his gaze that alternated between me and the ocean. He swayed slightly. Our arms brushed; warmth reminding me of our kiss in bed where all I wanted was another moment.

Disgust festered once more. Last night was a joke, one we spoke to one another a thousand times, but there was a sudden change that I wished hadn't occurred, or at least, I thought I wish the change hadn't occurred. Confused, always confused, going back and forth over what I wanted.

"Nice view," said Beau, making me chuckle. Reminded me of the lighthouse. Of another kiss.

"Yeah, nice."

"Do...do you want to explore the island?" Beau nervously twisted his nose ring when met with my scrutinizing gaze.

"What are you playing at?" I asked, suspicious.

"Nothing, why?"

"You don't need to act like you want to spend more time with me."

"I'm not acting," he hissed, offended. "Is it a problem if I want to be with you?"

He paled as quickly as I did. Yet more proof of change. Of something new overtaking what once always was. During a time in our lives when all was unstable, even the one monument we thought was steady had crashed to the ground. What the hell was I meant to do with the pieces?

"Is it a problem?" I shot back, stumping the both of us.

He wanted to be with me. I wanted to be with him too. Wasn't that always the case? Wasn't Anthony right? We used our parents as excuses to see each other, claiming that it was forced when, deep down, we knew it wasn't. This vacation proved as much. But was Beau thinking of our parents too? Did he imagine our conjoined family dinners that, maybe, could still be family...or this vacation could lead to what shattered them completely? Then drift to the end of August, to move in day, to Beau packing his bags to go to school ten hours away where he'd meet some guy that would make him smile, laugh, blush, and our vacation would be little more than a memory.

I would be no more than a past memory.

I stood, wishing to leave behind those thoughts, but that's what sucks about thoughts; they never leave you.

"Devin," Beau called. His fingers slipped between mine. "Look at me."

I was too scared. Scared of what would happen if I did. Scared of where and how far he'd take me from what I had always known.

"Are you mad...about the kiss or--"

I pulled away, walking ahead while feverishly searching the shoreline for our parents. They were ahead of us; our mothers busy picking seashells and our fathers lazing about on the sand.

"Which kiss?" I replied, stupidly.

"I don't know, both, I guess?" He rushed ahead of me, stopping me in my tracks. I attempted to evade him, but he gripped my shoulders. "If I upset you--"

"You didn't," I interjected, attempting to knock his hands away, but he held tight. I gripped his wrists, scowling. "Let go. Our parents are right there."

"So?"

"So they'll see."

"See what? Me touching your shoulders? What's wrong with that?" He huffed, fingers heated on my bare skin. I wished I wore a shirt. His touch was dangerous. His eyes were dangerous. His lips were dangerous. Beau was dangerous, more and more every passing day.

His expression darkened, eyes dim, lips set in a thin line. "Do I repulse you that much now?"

"Repulse? What?"

His hands dropped listlessly to his side. "I'm sorry for forcing myself on you."

"F-Force? No, you didn't, I...that...it's not like that."

My confusion fed into his confusion. His brow furrowed when asking, "Then what's wrong? Last night you wouldn't look at me. This morning you're quiet, skittish, you didn't even eat breakfast."

"I wasn't hungry."

Beau wasn't buying what I was selling. Hell, he wouldn't even give my stand a glance, passed by with a glare and maybe a spit for good measure, the jerk.

"Is it my turn now to say you don't have to pretend with me?" He asked, sounding as exhausted as I felt.

"Aren't we both pretending right now?" I argued, flinching when a few other tourists passed by. When they were out of range, I whispered, "Me pretending to be alright and you pretending not to be as freaked out as I am."

"Freaked out?"

"How can you not be? Beau, we kissed, twice." I held up two fingers for good measure. "Well, more like once then made out like we just found out what making out was."

I would relish in the fact that I made Beau blush later, but for now, I focused on how he shifted his weight then asked, "And I am meant to be freaked out by that because...?"

"You're joking." I tore off my baseball cap, ruffling my own hair before throwing it back on. "We were at each other's throats in a much different way only nine days ago. We went from hating each other to making out. How can you not be a bit concerned by this? Are you a fucking robot?"

Beau surveyed the area, checking over his shoulder, for our parents presumably. Then he gripped my wrist, dragging me towards the shade of the trees. I stumbled after him; "Beau, what the hell?!"

We scurried into the brush, hidden by trees and shade. The hold on my wrist turned into one of a different nature; his fingers slipping into my palm then holding tight. In the back of my mind I knew I should have shook him off, but I didn't. I clung to him, fearful he'd disappear if I let go.

"Does this freak you out?" he asked, pulling me close so that I was tempted to relive our time in that bunker or in bed. But he kept using his mouth to

talk and I was a tad disappointed by that. "Does this bother you? Do I bother you?"

"That's not what I mean, I swear, it's...it's just that we've always been the bickering enemies and I thought we always would be, but we're not."

"That's a bit debatable," he said, at least lightening the mood. He cradled my neck, splaying his fingers over the back of my throat, searing the touch into my nerves that jolted at the attention.

"What I'm saying is that, and this is weird to bring up, but our parents and our life and the way things are," I said, relieved that Beau gave an understanding nod. "Honestly, if our parents discovered us like this, they'd probably throw a damn celebration."

Beau snorted.

"Maybe they would accept this, but if they didn't then everything would be ruined. What if we try and it doesn't work out and we actually become enemies? What if we ruined their friendship and our family, the things we've always known and that I fucking love, that we both fucking love, I-I can't...that's, is that stupid? Do I sound stupid?"

"Not stupid at all."

"You're worried about it too, right?"

"Yeah." He bit his lip then asked, "So...better safe than sorry? We stop this?"

If he meant "my heart" when saying "this" then yeah, we definitely stopped that. Stopped then jolted it awake with a bolt of pain that had me cringing.

Beau stepped away. I used our hand hold to bring him back, locking him in place with an arm around his waist. I wasn't sure if that was my answer. Beau wasn't so sure either. We put the decision off for another day, basking instead in another kiss among the shade. Not like the first, not like the

second, a new moment; slow, warm, tender, where we took our time and relished in lingering glances.

My heart knew then that "this" could never be stopped. My mind, however, wasn't so sure yet.

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Our parents lingered on the beach while Beau and I decided to journey along the boardwalk. Without our parents around, we walked hand in hand, not even breaking apart for Beau to take pictures. Our hands may have disconnected, but I was already addicted. I slipped my arm around his waist or rested my chin on his shoulder or kissed his nape until his skin broke out with goosebumps. Was this too much too fast? If it was, I'd keep running forever.

Although, in the back of my mind, solemn thoughts crept in; that this wouldn't last. If it didn't end with our vacation then it would end with summer break. Maybe that was for the best, let us have these moments and let them end before they became too much, before we got in too deep.

"What was your oh shit moment?" I whispered against his neck, breathing in the scent of apple, which I could only assume was his shampoo.

"My what?"

"Your oh shit moment." My chin met his shoulder. I leaned against him as he rested along the rail, capturing the beach waves. "Like, when you realized you couldn't pretend to be what others expected you to be anymore. I know I've been like this all my life, but it was easy to pretend that I wasn't, to lie to myself even until... oh, do you remember Marley?"

Beau shook his head, sighing, but grinning all the while; "Strange change of subject, but yeah, I remember her. Why?"

"Not a change of subject. She was my oh shit moment."

He tilted his head back, softly brushing his forehead against my temple. The bill of my hat messed up his hair so he pulled it off and put it on himself. I let that slide since it was fucking cute and, damn it, he looked good in hats too! The world was unfair.

"I was hanging out with friends at the park when we headed back to my place for snacks. I went to the bathroom. When I came out, everyone but Marley was gone. Fuck, I had no idea what to say or what to do when we were alone, when she was leaning in for a kiss. There were all these worries that others would tease that I was gay simply because I didn't take the opportunity to kiss a pretty girl. As a guy, I'm meant to take that opportunity, y'know?"

Beau frowned, nodding.

"And back then I knew something was different but not necessarily what, but then--" I grinned, retreating when Beau began to walk again. He took my hand. "You came running into the house, furious, because earlier that day I put a fake spider in your mailbox to scare you when you checked the mail."

Beau chuckled. "Yeah, thanks for that."

"You're welcome!" I chirped. "But I am sorry for yelling at you that day. I wasn't angry that you ruined the moment at all. I was grateful, but I was supposed to be mad so I played the part."

"So, were there any other instances where you pretended to be angry?"

A good question that led to yet another oh shit moment. I couldn't lie that I hated Beau, ever, not when we were younger and especially not then. The lie I had always known shattered. I didn't know what to do with the broken pieces.

"Plenty," I answered. "You've always been fun to piss off."

He snorted.

"Anyways, that was my oh shit moment, where I realized I would be faking what came naturally to others and I couldn't lie to myself anymore."

Beau hummed, then avoided my gaze to grumble, "Mine would have been my first kiss, although it wasn't exactly a grand experience. When I went to that Battle of the Bands concert--"

"I swear to all that is unholy in this world, if it's the one that you said started at seven, but it began at six, so I didn't leave basketball practice early and you and your cousin left without me because I was late, I will lose my shit!"

He kissed me, which was answer enough.

"You son of a bitch!" I gaped, trying to back away from the second kiss, but he caught me, nibbling on my bottom lip as if that were an apology. Maybe it was working, but that wasn't the point! "You were making out with someone at a concert that we were meant to go to together!"

"You only wanted to go to bug me," he whispered against my lips that eagerly met his for longer than they probably should have, but my brain had been foggy all day. I was lost. Lost in the moment, wishing this to be our reality forever, knowing that it'd inevitably end, but pretending that it wouldn't, or that I would be ok when it did, so I could merely enjoy Beau being in my arms.

"Nuh uh," I grunted after tearing myself away. "I wanted to go to a concert! And you knew my parents wouldn't let me go alone, but none of my friends wanted to go. Ugh!"

"Do you want to hear the story or not?" He kept walking, pulling me along with ease.

"Go on," I huffed.

"So I went to the concert--"

"Without me, you fucking asshole."

"--And my cousin was not interested. He met up with his girlfriend so I was alone and eventually came across this guy, who was very cute and very open, and ended up being there with his boyfriend, who was not pleased to discover him making out with some guy behind the concession stand."

"I should feel sorry for you, but I don't."

Beau laughed then smiled, something a little sad, something a little happy. "Guess that was my oh shit moment because I had always been so pent up and, finally, I thought, oh, this is right. This is what I've been missing...at least until the angry boyfriend turned the corner."

"Yeah." I laughed. "Yeah, that would ruin it."

"Sorry that I ruined your chance to go to the concert."

"Ah, well, I should have known better than to believe you. We always hated each other."

"I never actually hated you," he blurted out. Four words that rang louder than thunder even when, moments ago, I admitted to myself that I had never hated him either. Hearing the truth was much different than thinking it though.

I actually stopped. Beau didn't, taking a few steps ahead so that our hands swayed between us. The bill of my cap cut a deep shadow, hiding his expression when he whispered, "I was jealous."

"Of what?"

"You."

I couldn't begin to comprehend what he meant. How could Beau be jealous of me? He was insanely good looking, smart, athletic, *and* had an amazing artistic eye whether it came to photography or writing or drawing. He was miles ahead of me in every regard, or so I thought.

"Everyone compared us because we were always around each other," he said, arcing his neck to the sky. "You were the naturally bright, happy child

and I was the dark, gloomy one. Put you in a room and you could make friends with the dust on the walls. Put me in a room and you'd be lucky to get a few words out of me. Even while on vacation you somehow made friends with total strangers like it was nothing."

The only words I could form were a sputtered question; "B-But you can talk to strangers, you talked with Johnny?"

"Yeah, after he flirted and I knew we had something in common. You don't need that though. You can talk about the weather and make it entertaining. I never had the courage to be like you. I put on a fake face to please others, to act and pretend like someone I'm not because I'm scared they won't like the dark, gloomy boy underneath. I was jealous and I never knew what to do with that jealousy." He finally faced me, wearing an almost scared expression when he said, "Claiming to hate you is the biggest lie I've ever given."

I wasn't sure how to respond, not with words at least, so I kissed him. His arms slipped around my waist, fingers pressing into my sides until they ached, clinging to me like the kiss was our first or our last or a promise and a request for more. I lost count how many kisses were shared that day, and yet, that was the only idea that came to mind; kiss him until, even when he left for college, he would never forget me.

.....~.....o) (.....~.....

Oh buddy, lots of kissing this chapter! These two simply can't keep their hands to themselves anymore, can they? What do you think about their worries concerning their family, the changes in their lives and, of course, the fact that Beau is going far away for school?

Idk why I didn't take any pictures of the boardwalk, but here's the beach with all the shells. We got to the beach too late to walk to the island, but you can take the path when the ride is out, so the signs said there.





11

The days spent at Silver Sands were like the breaking of a dam. The walls built within our own minds disintegrated into dust, allowing a stream of truth to filter in. For the moment, that truth was warm. A welcome sensation when waking to Beau's messy hair and crooked smile, or the touch of our hands intertwined under the summer sun, or a kiss on the beach, after breakfast, in bed, whenever and for no reason other than just because. We never separated, splashing in the cool ocean waves, laying on the warm sand or walking the boardwalk to take pictures and talk.

Once bickering arguments turned into almost questioning challenges. Teasing that built tension until we broke, kissing or laughing or pushing past yet another boundary. It happened on our final night at Silver Sands.

Late that evening, a certain someone did not listen to their mother concerning the reapplication of sunscreen, and that certain someone grimaced while waiting in bed for some form of relief. The hotel door opened. Beau entered, aloe vera in hand. I would have gone with him, but I wasn't in the mood for a lecture from my mother dearest.

Rounding the bed, he sat beside me, one leg resting on the mattress. I sat angled with my back to him where the brunt of the burn resided.

"You're an idiot," he stated.

"No, the sun is just an asshole."

"I told you to put more sunscreen on earlier."

Smirking, I turned slightly to flick his bangs. "Hey, Mom, you look different. Did you get a haircut?"

"If someone used their head, I wouldn't have to act motherly."

"Eeeh, you jest."

Beau curled his nose then leaned away when I moved in. His breath fanned against my warming cheeks. His own face was light pink with a blush, eyes already darting to my lips.

"Are you implying that you feel obligated to care about me instead of wanting *the honor* to care for me?" I teased.

"Honor?" He snorted then slammed a cold hand against my back. I yelped, my entire body spasming from the ripple of pain followed by the cool relief of aloe vera. "Get over yourself, dumb ass."

"I know you like it. Taking care of me."

"Oh, yeah? What makes you say that?"

"Because you've always done it without question and without expecting anything in return," I admitted, reminiscing for reasons unknown, or reasons I continued to ignore.

His movements stilled then picked up. "I don't know what you've been smoking, but sharing is caring."

I chuckled, skin tingling from the constant motion of Beau's hand across my back, over my shoulders. He was careful, slow, unknowingly making my breath catch in my throat.

"Fifth grade, Tanner Wells--"

Beau hummed. "The asshole from the class next door?"

"Yeah. He had a bunch of us play Bloody Mary, not cluing me in that he got one of the girls to hide in the stalls with a wig. Scared the hell out of me. I cried until my parents had to come get me, but you sat with me in the office and held my hand the whole time, lecturing me that ghosts aren't real."

"Because they aren't. You were easy to tease. You need to--" he caught himself, probably noticed my smirk and chose to stop there.

"Gym class. Seventh grade. I was being super competitive, sprained my ankle during a basketball game and refused to sit out until you dragged my ass to the nurse's office, even as I yelled at you the whole time."

"...what's your point?" he whispered, fingers running slowly over my shoulders until the bed creaked. I faced him. He averted his gaze, wiping his hands on one of the beach towels laying on the bed.

"My point is that there are plenty of other instances where you took care of me without me ever returning the favor."

Beau met my gaze, head tilted. "Didn't you?" he challenged. "You always took notes in class for me when I was sick, but you never took any of your own. And you'd come running over claiming that you didn't want to miss my possible death, but you, who absolutely hates cooking, would make me a terrible bowl of soup."

He suddenly chuckled. "Maybe that was less about caring and more about hoping to kill me with your cooking?"

"Uh oh, you caught me."

We both laughed.

"You always ate it, though," I added.

"Hmm?"

"The soup."

Beau cleared his throat and shrugged.

"How can I make it up to you?" I asked, smirking when he rolled his eyes. Our thighs brushed, skin hot from something much different than a sunburn.

"What are you willing to do to make it up to me?"

"Anything."

"You sure about that?" he whispered, leaning in. The heat between us simmered then scorched, but I wanted more. Not sure where we were going, but hoping it was leading somewhere.

"Positive," I answered against his lips, eyes fluttering closed.

"Kiss me until I'm sick of you."

"Will you ever be?"

"Don't know. Kiss me and find out."

I already planned to, swiftly capturing Beau's lips in a breathy kiss. One where he sucked the air from my lungs, forcing me to heave air through my nose like it was the last breath I would ever take. An otherworldly kiss, unreal even after all the ones before. Every kiss was a jolt, a shot of adrenaline to my veins that rippled through every muscle until the nerves burst with the force of fireworks.

Then he kissed at my bottom lip, my cheek, my neck, then returned. His fingers ghosted over my chest, the burn thrumming to entice a hiss that had Beau rearing back. But I wanted more. Another second. Another taste. Because every kiss was a sudden new revelation; I really *didn't* know everything about Beau. I didn't know what made him blush. What made him moan. What made him desperate. And, damn, had I become the very definition of greedy. I was itching to find out, to map out every movement, every sound until I knew *everything* .

I twisted my fingers into his hair, crashing our lips together to continue. To brush my tongue over his bottom lip, to feel his soft moans against my mouth, to hear my own follow when he finally slipped into my lap. One arm wrapped around his waist, fingers moving up the spasming muscles of his back as I dragged his shirt up higher and higher until it tugged beneath his arms.

There was a moment when we broke apart that a silent question was shared. Where I peered into green eyes above pink cheeks and he ran his fingers over my features as if to memorize every piece. I let him, sitting quietly,

heart thrumming even in the tip of my toes, until he finally moved. His shirt was gone, leaning back in to kiss me deeply when bringing his hips against mine. For a moment I worried, feared this was too much too fast, but weren't we always too much too fast?

But then I thought, *doesn't it feel like we've been waiting forever?*

We both leaned in to give the same answer pressed into a kiss.

Beau was right. I never liked taking notes, but he was always the exception. Now I planned to do more than take notes; I was going to memorize every moment, every action that resulted in a hiss or a moan or a shudder. When his voice rose higher or turned gruff and low until it rattled in my ears. How he moved, swaying his hips against mine or running his calloused hand down my sides. What he liked, a nip at the base of his neck, my fingers running up his spine. How he tasted, how his skin felt scorching hot beneath my trembling lips and fingertips. The scent of sweat and his apple shampoo and the sea, then all that tasted in a kiss or felt in a touch that seared hot fire into my veins.

The fact that the one in my arms was Beau was the only reason I felt anything and that only made my heart hammer more. Maybe I would have been worried if I didn't hear Beau's labored breath or feel his own pulse humming against my lips. Beau, the boy I've always known, the one that has always driven me wild in more ways than one, made me wish the moment could last forever. If I could have bottled these feelings to take out and relive again and again then I would have. But the moment ended in a shuttered breath, a trembling kiss and lust filled eyes that disappeared beneath fluttering eyelashes.

Beau was breathing heavy in my arms, leaning against me as our lips met in a lazy kiss. There was a mess between us that neither planned to clean up just yet.

He smirked when I asked, "So, are you sick of me yet?"

"Not even a little."

And his kiss was as unreal as the first.

.....~.....o) (o.....~.....

We all sat in the van heading for our final destination; Skyland Manor in New Jersey. That meant there were only three days left of our vacation. Beau and I must have unanimously agreed not to bring that fact up because, well, we hadn't brought it up. In the back seat, we sat closer than usual, hands hands intertwined between us, but I desperately wanted more. After last night, I wanted to be closer. I wanted to lean into his side or pull him into my lap or kiss him in broad daylight. Love drunk might have been putting my feelings mildly and maybe I was slightly worried.

What would happen when this all ended? Was this going to end? Did he want this to continue after vacation? *Did I?*

I squeezed Beau's hand a little tighter. He did the same, and I wondered if he also felt the same.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Anthony sent a text.

Anthony: Soooo... how'd the talk go? :D

My heart jumped into my throat, gaze drifting to Beau. He was watching videos on his phone, same apathetic expression as usual, but now my heart raced because I had it *that* bad.

Devin: What talk?

Anthony: I will kick you in the dick.

Devin: How? You're miles away.

Anthony: You think I won't remember when you get back?

Devin: I'll avoid you.

Anthony: I'll wait for years, until you are least expecting it then *WHAM!* Dick gone, kicked back up into your appendix.

Devin: That's not where a dick comes from.

Anthony: STOP STALLING AND TELL ME!!!!

My phone sat in my lap, Anthony's messaging staring back at me. I swore I heard him shouting at me, insisting to hear the truth that I wasn't sure I was ready to admit, especially when I had no idea what was really happening. Beau and I hadn't talked about what happened next. I sure as hell didn't have the guts to bring it up either.

Devin: We didn't talk. Fighting as usual.

Anthony: Why do I get the feeling that you're lying?

Devin: Because you're hoping for it to be a lie, probably because you're bored and want to bug me.

Anthony: ...how do you know me so well?

Devin: fuck off

Anthony: You're hurting my feelings (>_<)

Devin: Good ^_^

When Anthony didn't immediately reply I expected that to be the end of our conversation, but then the text came. One that had me sitting quietly for the rest of the ride.

Anthony: I get that you don't want to talk, that's fine. I know something's up. You've been quiet in the chat and our last phone call made it pretty obvious there's something going on with Beau (but when isn't there? lol) When or if you want to talk, I'm here, seriously. You aren't the only one freaking out about graduating, about college, about change, you know that, right? None of us are really ready, even when we claim to be. We're suddenly going from having to raise our hands to ask to go to the bathroom to having to decide what the hell we want to do with the rest of our lives, as if that makes *any* sense. I don't really know what's going on, but it's ok to

worry about it, to be scared, to not know what to do, and it's ok to talk about it with me or Beau or your parents, whoever.

Anyway, that's it, I guess? Make sure to enjoy your vacation because I *will* be bugging the hell out of you once you're back :D

I hated that all I could respond with was a meager "*thanks*," but I was confident Anthony understood. Seemed he really did always understand, more than most probably thought. I guess I was a little grateful for it, and him.

"What's up?" Beau asked, making me realize that I was staring at him. "You're staring," he added.

"Nothing," I lied, scooting closer. He gave me a confused glance, eyes shifting to our parents then back. "My phone battery died. Let's watch something on yours."

"Suffer on your own," he whispered, but let me sit next to him, our hands still clasped between us.

We sat quietly together for the remainder of the drive, neither of us possibly able to guess what awaited us.

~

***whispers* I totally didn't forget to update Wednesday... ANYWHO! Here ya go! Communication will be the downfall of us all. Oh, how easy it sounds to just talk, but it's just not >.< Life, why are you so cruel? So our boys have gone past kissing, oh my! Also, obviously didn't want to write it lol didn't feel right with this story anyway. They haven't said anything about their relationship after vacation ends, though. Will Devin bring it up? Will Beau? What could happen in the last 3 days of vacation?**

I didn't include this in the story, but on my vacation we stopped at another lighthouse on the way to New Jersey. It was a small thing, super cute and in a nice spot too!



12

The road to the manor was less than hospitable, made up of looming trees over a windy road that made us all question if we were about to be trapped in a serial killer's lair, but the actual estate was astounding. A small garden guarded by lion statues sat at the entrance. The road twisted back into the treeline that opened to a parking lot. We got a bare glimpse of the manor through the trees. A narrow peak above the trees. A circular tower of stone.

"Can we pull up to the door to take in our belongings first or do we have to park?" Mom asked.

"Seems like the road leads to the door so let's try," Dad replied.

I was vibrating in my seat, already excited by the damn garden and that was coming from someone that never really gave a damn about flowers. The garden stretched from the entrance to far behind the castle, so Mom claimed. Every year different flowers were planted, but were there so many flowers in existence? Already there were too many to count, varying shades of orange, yellow, pink, purple, every shade of the rainbow scattered on either side of the road, as if an artist flicked a paint brush and simply let the colors sit. Sagging tree limbs hung overhead, casting cool shade while pink leaves fluttered in the wind from trees with foliage like cotton candy.

Dad rounded the bend and we came upon the castle, a structure of gray stone and stained glass windows engraved with sigils. Not as big as I expected, wider than it was tall, but it felt like we were transported to another world. The entrance was rounded, a deep brown entryway that led to a door with iron clasps. We all hurried out of the van, our necks craned to take in the towers and moss covered roof. Ivy slithered up the side, making the castle almost appear made by nature.

"This is gorgeous," Aunt Zoey whispered, linking her arm with Uncle David's.

Beau was reaching for his camera. The both of us were on the verge of bolting when Mom said, "Let's check in first then have a look around."

I pouted. "I want to look around now."

"Stop being so impatient. We're here for three days."

Mom knocked first earning a few snickers from us. She hissed then hesitantly opened the door, grunting from how heavy it was.

"Hello?" she called, stepping into the foyer so we could follow.

I stood behind Beau, admiring the wooden paneled walls and stone ceiling. To the left there was a red carpeted staircase leading to the second floor and a white hall. A golden mirror hung on the wall with a checkered chair in the corner. On the right there was an open doorway to a *very* pink room. A woman got up from a white desk, meeting us with a bright smile. Our parents spoke with her while Beau and I gawked at our surroundings. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but I was impressed. There were metal lamps hanging from the ceilings and statues in corners.

Something creaked, catching both our attention. I shook Beau's arms when the wooden paneled wall opened. I knew there were hidden passages! The wooden panel actually had a door, which, once I had a closer look, was obvious with the golden handle. A woman poked her head out, waved at us then went back in.

"Boys, this way," Aunt Zoey called, gesturing for us to follow up the stairs.

The lady of the pink room was guiding them, going on about the history of the castle. Apparently it went through a few hands, first the original owner then it was a christian women's college then it was vacant for a while until the state bought it to make into a historical landmark. Neat. While going up the stairs, we passed the largest window of all; almost twice my height. An oddly shaped chandelier hung overhead, dimly lighting the walk way.

Mom and Dad got to stay in Queen Antoinette's Quarters--no queen's lived there though, but I let it slide. Aunt Zoey and Uncle David got King Alfred's

Suite while Beau and I got an unnamed room. I would have complained, but we were in a castle. I was in an abnormally good mood.

"The wall is a closet, Beau!" I exclaimed after we dragged all our belongings to our rooms.

Beau tinkered with his camera while I opened the wooden paneled wall, similar to what was downstairs. There was a wide window next to the king sized bed decked out with green satin sheets and white pillows. A TV sat on an old dresser with leaf shaped handles. A door in the back of the room led to another small closet and our connected bathroom. From our window we saw the front of the estate, only adding to the otherworldly affect. There was only nature cradling us in her grasp.

"We'll be sleeping under a chandelier. Bougie," I snickered, falling back on the bed.

Beau slid his camera around his neck. "No complaining today?"

"Hmm? What is there to complain about?"

Beau smirked, gesturing to the single bed. "We have to share a bed."

"Do you want me to complain?"

"No. Was just expecting it. Figured you'd want to keep up the show for our folks at least."

Before I could retort, he stole a kiss. My cheeks warmed when I lost myself in a green gaze. "Come on," he said. "Let's go find the secret passages you've been talking about."

"I'm telling you, there has to be one!"

The adventure of Skyland Manor began.

I fiddled with every door knob I could. Once I actually opened a closet of towels and couldn't shut the door again. Beau barely shut it then pushed us along, hissing about my childish ways all the while. We traversed the

narrow halls, admiring the old window panes and pictures. They even had a winding stone staircase that I ran from top to bottom--well, almost bottom. One of the ladies that worked there caught me peering at the chained off portion of the basement. Apparently, there was a vault down there and of course that had me asking more questions which led too--

"This place is haunted y'know."

Beau sighed. I gulped.

"H-Haunted?" I whispered. "Isn't this supposed to be a wedding venue? Who would want to come to a haunted wedding venue?"

"You'd be surprised," the worker giggled. "And it's not something we really advertise, but we all have stories."

"What... kind of s-stories?"

"Don't answer that," Beau hissed. "He won't sleep tonight if you do."

"I'm fine!" I argued.

The girl led us down a hall of statues. At the end of the hall there was a door leading into some form of lounge. There was a piano, some chairs, a wall of books, a stone fireplace, and a small bar. She pointed behind the bar and said, "One night when I was locking up, I turned off the lights and saw him there."

"Him...?"

"There was a shadowy male silhouette behind the bar. When I turned the lights back on, he vanished."

"Trick of the light," whispered the non-believer. I swatted him with my hand. He left us be, wandering the area to take pictures.

"Sometimes I hear footsteps too," the girl said with a shiver. "I'll be in my office and swear I hear someone, but when I check there's no one here. It has happened to my co-workers too. Our groundskeeper swears that he has

seen the same woman in white walking through the gardens in the evenings."

"Don't worry though!" She patted my back, smiling. "Nothing bad has happened."

Then she left as if she hadn't made me break out with goosebumps.

"Stop freaking out. There's no such thing as ghosts," Beau stated.

"I'm not freaking out!"

"I can hear your teeth chattering from here."

"My teeth aren't chattering either," I grumbled, swiftly leaving the room. Not because of the ghost! Only because I wanted to explore more before it got too dark.

Most of our day was spent inside. Although the castle was by no means large, there was so much character and places to explore that we spent the afternoon exploring. We searched the first, second, and third floor as much as we could. There were too many doors to count, most of them locked since they were made up to be bedrooms for guests. But there was a sitting area for guests with games, a dining room that could house a family of five, a glass enclosed terrace that overlooked the backyard and so much more. Sometimes we returned to the receptionist to ask questions and she'd give us little tales of the castle. The man that built it didn't even live there full time. It was their summer home!

"The idea that this was only someone's summer home kind of pisses me off," I said when we returned to our room that night.

Beau plopped on the bottom of the bed, peering at the many photos taken. I sat with him, leaning my head against his shoulder. There were a lot of pictures with me in them since I willingly agreed to be his model today.

"Hey," I said. "You're never in these pictures."

"No shit."

"You should be. You're on this vacation too." I sat up and held out my hand.
"Give it here."

Beau scanned me from top to bottom then snorted. "No."

"I can take one measly picture."

"You are not touching my camera."

"One picture with me," I said, smiling at his wide eyes. I got closer, wrapping an arm around his neck. "I can get a better angle to take a picture of us. Come on."

Beau shifted then handed me the camera. He cleared his throat, averting his gaze when leaning into me.

"Make sure to smile. It's an honor to take a photo with me," I teased.

He rolled his eyes. "Just take the damn--"

I kissed his cheek and took the shot.

"A little blurry," I said, admiring my piece of art. Beau sat by me wide-eyed and blushing both in the photo and now. He didn't move until I sat the camera in his lap. "You're welcome. Now, I'm gonna go take a bath in that huge ass tub!"

I bolted before Beau could respond, maybe to tease him or maybe to hide my own blushing. Who really knew.

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How many idiots did it take to work a bathtub? More than two apparently.

"I don't get it," I stated with an equally befuddled Beau at my side. "Why are there three knobs? And which is which?!"

Beau shrugged, kneeling next to the tub. "Just twist them until it works."

"But the sign said it will take at least 10 minutes to heat up the water. What if I turn on the wrong one and I end up having running water for 20 minutes? That's such a waste."

"Then don't leave. Sit here and test the water."

"Why aren't there instructions?" I grumbled, crossing my arms. "And what is the point of that?" I pointed to the pipes on the wall. They were next to the toilet in the shape of a large square. "They aren't for the toilet water, are they?"

"You're awfully curious this evening."

"And you're not?"

"Not about pipes." Beau stood, dusting off his pants. "Why can't you just get a shower?"

"It'd still take time for the water to heat up and I'm not missing the chance to sit in this massive thing!" I pointed to said massive thing. "It almost comes up to my shoulder. It's basically a mini-pool."

Beau snorted. "Don't take forever. I want a shower."

He poked me in the head then left. After about ten minutes of fiddling with the knobs, I figured it out. The wait was worth it when I got in, giggling like a kid. I was taking a bath in a castle! How cool was that?!

Afterwards though, when Beau was getting his shower, I heard it. Footsteps.

I'll be in my office and swear I hear someone, but when I check there's no one here.

Swallowing the lump of fear in my throat, I tiptoed to the door, swinging it open to find an empty hallway. Oh hell no!

I locked the door--as if that'd help--then jumped into bed. Motion out of the corner of my eye caught my attention, freezing me with fear until I

recognized the silhouette stepping around the bed. Beau raised a brow.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I pointed to the door. "The ghost is real. I heard it."

He sighed. "You shouldn't have asked her anything. Now you're going to have nightmares and I will suffer the consequences."

"I heard footsteps and checked," I hissed. "There was no one out--"

More footsteps. Right outside the door. Beau huffed and went for the door, swinging it open to find Uncle David on the other side. He had his card key out, ready to go into his own room that was adjacent to ours. He grinned.

"Hey boys, you two comfortable?"

"I am. Not sure about this idiot." Beau gestured over his shoulder.

"I'm not an idiot! Uncle David wasn't out there earlier!"

Uncle David tilted his head.

"Scaredy cat thought there was a ghost in the hall," Beau explained. Uncle David laughed.

"I'm not a scaredy cat. The worker said this place is haunted," I growled.

"Is it?" Uncle David chuckled. "Well... I hope we survive the night." He winked then stepped into his room. What a jerk, none of them believed me!

Beau closed the door. "Stop thinking about it and get some sleep."

"Telling me not to think about it requires thinking about it."

"You are fucking exhausting."

"Thanks."

Beau shut off the lights. He slid into bed, saddling up next to me. I was warm, but made no complaints as he cuddled into my side.

"You going to cuddle with me all night?" I whispered.

"Mhm."

"To protect me from the ghost?"

He chuckled. "Yeah."

"How romantic, my knight in shining armor."

"Well, we are in a castle. I should be more chivalrous, don't you agree?"

"I think you should be more chivalrous period."

Beau kissed my shoulder. We fell into silence. The TV was on, quietly playing a show that I wasn't paying any mind to. I wasn't thinking about the so-called ghost either. No, I was fixated on the fact that another day had come and gone. There were two days left of our vacation. Two days of this; of me running my fingers over Beau's arm, of looking him in the eye with a silent request that he was quick to oblige. He leaned over me, a warm body shivering in my grasp. The taste of his lips and the subtle flutter of his eyelashes against my cheeks when he slowly descended to kiss at the nape of my neck.

Two days... then what? We went home. We waited for the end of summer. We separated. And everything fell apart.

"Devin." His voice tickled against my neck.

"Y-Yeah?"

"What happens when vacation ends?"

The once heated room filled with our gasped breaths froze over in chilled silence. He rose, the light of the TV casting shadows beneath his eyes.

"What happens when we go home?" he asked, as if the first question wasn't enough to knock the air from my lungs.

He threw out my fears as if he had read my mind. What happened? What did we want to happen and did it matter? Because Beau would leave before our budding romance even really began. We were meant to stop this before it got too far but...but when he looked at me like that, like I was whole world, I realized we hadn't stopped anything. Only started it.

So I panicked.

"Nothing," I answered, pushing him off me. "We... we go back to the way things were. Forget this ever happened."

He was quiet. Then he sighed. "Right..."

The mattress squeaked as he settled into place with as much space between us as the first time we shared a bed. All I wanted to do was reach across and hold him and apologize and promise that we'd go home hand in hand.

But I didn't. I couldn't. Because I was a coward.

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I'm so sorry, guys! With Thanksgiving I totally forgot to update then I was sitting here preparing to post the last update only to realize I HAVEN'T UPDATED IN, LIKE, TWO WEEKS! So I'm going to post a chapter tomorrow and the final chapter on Monday. Start thinking up questions for the Q&A! My baby boys, noooooooooo! They were doing so well, but now Devin has pushed Beau away. Hmm, what could happen in the remaining two days?

Here a picture of part of the castle! My phone takes good pictures in the day, but everything else I have is... blurry garbage -_-



13

When I woke up, I was alone.

Aunt Zoey called me down for breakfast, explaining that Beau already went. I ate with our parents, mostly only poking at my food. I didn't even get that excited when Aunt Zoey started a conversation with a guy at the next table. He was an engineer, or something, and explained that the pipes on the bathroom wall heated up from the hot water. You were supposed to put your towels on them so they'd be warm when you got out of the tub. Pfft, rich people.

"Devin," Mom called. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Nothing." I hummed then stood. "I'm not that hungry, that's all. So, uh, are we going to the lake today?"

"Yeah, once we finish eating. Make sure to put sunblock on. I'm serious. You're still getting over your last sunburn."

I waved off her concern and returned to my room. Beau was missing, no doubt out taking more pictures of the gardens. If last night didn't happen, I would have been with him...

"You can't regret it now," I whispered. "This shouldn't have started to begin with."

My heart wasn't as keen on the idea of forgetting as my mind though. It refused to slow, refused to give me a moment to properly breathe, especially when Beau finally showed himself. He stepped into the room, face blank and lips sealed. He grabbed a towel from his luggage, only speaking to me when he walked away, "We're leaving for the lake."

"Ah, o-ok."

I grabbed my stuff, rushing after him until I remembered last night. I lingered a few steps behind, nervously watching his back. Was he always so stiff? Or was he as uncomfortable as I was? That was a dumb question, I guess.

Our parents were chattering away in the van on the way to the lake, thinking nothing of their moody children continuing to be moody in the backseat. I, on the other hand, sat silently and nervously, watching Beau out of the corner of my eye. He leaned against the window, watching the view pass us by. His lips were tilted into a frown that only dug the blade of guilt further into my heart that had been screaming since last night.

But no matter how much it hurt, I had made up my mind. The time to end it had finally reared its ugly head. Our lives were taking different paths and that was ok. It happened. We had our own choices to make. Beau chose a school ten hours away, a life that would be grown in a new place with new people and new experiences. Even I would make a new life at school. The next adventure began now, and we were already on our own way.

The drive to the lake was short. Definitely not as crowded as the beach, but there were a handful of boats in the water. Mom had us taking pictures, forcing Beau and I together again. My arm was tense around his shoulder and Aunt Zoey pouted for a good five minutes to make Beau smile. The moment the picture was taken, he left, leaving me cold.

Without Beau, the day was gray. The water was too cold, the sun too hot, the food tasteless, and the laughter nonexistent. I sat on the shore, watching the water wash around me when Dad sat next to me. He offered some of his water then sighed when I declined.

"Beautiful out here, isn't it?" he hummed.

"Yeah..." My gaze shifted to a lonely boy with a camera. "Beautiful."

"Get into a fight, did ya?"

"Yeah--" I bit my lip then cleared my throat. "What are you talking about?"

Dad chuckled, stretching out his legs. I didn't see his face, but I heard the smile in his voice, "You and Beau never really got along, but you are acting abnormally weird today."

"We're extra annoyed with each other after being forced together for almost two weeks."

"I'd believe that if you hadn't been pretty docile the last few days." Dad pressed his hand to my shoulder. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing that won't blow over soon enough."

"Are you sure? I know summer feels long, but it will end. And your opportunity will disappear with it."

"What if I should let the opportunity disappear?" I looked at him with hope that he could answer, that he could quell the worries burrowing into my core.

"Then you need to ask yourself now if it's a regret you're willing to carry."

Dad's advice lingered even after he walked away.

What I wanted, what I thought I wanted, what could or should be done, they were all questions that never had a solid answer. One day there was a decision and the next it was reversed. Would I regret this moment forever? Or would I grow up and find something or someone to fill the void?

I looked at the one that had once filled that void, watched him walk through the water and run his fingers through his hair. He hid behind a lens, capturing memories and maybe some regrets too. Then he caught me staring, lowering his camera to show wide eyes then a furrowed brow. I waved without considering it, which made him huff. He turned his back to me, just like I had done to him.

I hoped that by waiting long enough, these feelings would fade, which was a ridiculous thought for a ridiculous boy.

And so day two ended without a word, only longing glances from afar that were caught more times than I was comfortable with. Every second lasted a lifetime. Beau was unreadable one second then annoyed the next. He'd turn away or scowl or try to hide and I couldn't blame him. I wish I could stop too, but he was a magnet and I was drawn. Drawn to the sound of his voice or the color of his eyes or the silent click of a camera.

But I was the dumb ass that ended it so I was the dumb ass that had to live with it. It was for the best. This would make it easier, even if it sure as hell wasn't the least bit easy.

After another night struggling to sleep, the last day arrived.

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I woke up and got ready before Beau. When he saw me sitting at the end of the bed, he scowled.

"Breakfast is ready. Our parents are going back to the lake today. Are you going with them?" I asked.

"Are you?" he grunted, slipping out of bed to head for the bathroom.

"Probably not."

"Hmm." The bathroom door slammed shut.

I wasn't an idiot. He wanted me to answer honestly so he could decide where he would go, which would be the place without me. The thought stung, but I deserved it just like I deserved the glare he gave when I followed him down to breakfast.

"Stop," he hissed.

"Stop what?"

He faced me, two steps down on the stairwell. The sun cut in through the fogged windows. He swallowed hard, fingers trembling on the railing. If

this situation were different, I would have teased him, but I was lacking my typical hilarity lately.

"You said to go back to the way things were," he said. "So stop sticking near me. Stop watching me. Stop..." He turned away. "Just stop."

I gave Beau what he wanted. He walked away, alone, leaving me at the top of the stairs. The hunger once within me dissipated. The mere smell of food made me queasy, so I left. I wouldn't be going to the lake. Instead, I meandered alone around the gardens. There was a long, narrow stone waterway filled with lilies and white flowers. The water cascaded into a pond by some stairs that led to an open green field. I took a guess that the weddings took place there.

At the end of the field there was a circular bench of stone, discolored with age. It sat beneath the cotton candy trees that were smelled as sweet as the pink of their leaves. They fell into my lap where I picked at them mindlessly until a shadow came into view.

"Are you going to skip lunch too?"

I raised my head, shocked to find Beau standing before me with his camera around his neck. He sighed then sat next to me, closer than I thought he would, close enough that our arms brushed from any little movement. I wanted to be closer though, to feel his warmth searing into my bones.

"Is it lunchtime already?" I asked.

"Mhm."

"I sat here a while." I chuckled.

"Hours."

"You were watching?" I smirked. "Pervert."

"I passed by a few times. Idiot."

It felt good to talk with him even for a moment.

"Our parents?" I asked.

"Are at the lake."

"You didn't go with them?"

"Obviously."

"Why not?"

I tensed when Beau slipped his hand into mine. He linked our fingers, staring ahead as he released a shaky breath and asked, "You said we act like this never happened when vacation ends, right?"

I nodded.

"Then we have today."

An argument built on the tip of my tongue. Maybe Beau knew that. Maybe he was more cunning than I expected. He silenced any argument with a kiss. Logic was kicked to the curb by a desperate heart that yearned for one moment of his attention. Once I had it, I drowned in the moment, in the many moments that continued. We walked the grounds together hand in hand. Beau took pictures, chuckling at my ridiculous poses next to funny fountains or laying goofily in front of the flowers. We ate lunch together and sat in the giant red velvet chairs fit for kings.

In the back of my mind I knew we were making things worse. We were pretending for the day while knowing it'd end when morning came. I knew I could take my words back. Beau was waiting for it, hoping for it... and I was too. But then the fear settled in, the nerves of what tomorrow would bring, of three months from now, of a year from now. Everything would come crashing down, taking away all that ever was and leaving me with only the dust of precious memories.

The fear of falling outweighed heartbreak.

So I continued to pretend until evening arrived. We returned to the gardens after dinner with the folks. Beau wanted one last round of pictures in the

night and I tagged along. He fiddled with his camera behind me while I admired the flowers that slept soundly in the dark. Pathways were lined with trees and flowers, but there was one archway that lingered among the garden. Cobblestones rested beneath it leading to another portion of the garden. Perhaps it was a small road once, left to fade away among the flowers.

Beau moved beneath it. I was a few steps behind until the question came, a quiet whisper that chilled; "Are we really over?"

I froze, gaze drifting to my feet. "Did we ever start?"

"I sure as hell think we did."

"What do you want? Three more months so we can end it when you're packing your bags?"

"This isn't the stone age. We have phones, video calls--"

"Is that enough?" I looked up, faced with his trembling shoulders. His head hung low. "It's a long distance relationship with our two dumb asses. Do you honestly think that could work?"

"Yes." He turned to me, confidence or maybe desperation etched into his eyes. "We're two very stubborn dumb asses. We will make it work."

"You hope--"

"Every relationship is about hope."

Beau stepped towards me. I retreated, an action that didn't go unnoticed. He scowled, standing beneath the archway that darkened his features.

"I can't go back to the way things were. I sure as hell can't forget!" he bellowed. "Maybe it's easy for you, but it's not for me."

"Who the hell said it'd be easy?! I'm just doing what makes sense!"

"What makes sense?" Beau guffawed. "Pretending to give a damn about me then tossing me aside like trash makes sense?"

"What?! No, that's not--"

"Then what is it?" he whimpered. "What was the point of getting my hopes up? What was the point of making it worse?"

"Making what worse?"

"Don't you understand yet?" he whispered, wearing a sad smile that chipped at my heart.

He didn't explain. Not at first. He stood there, watching me with that same damn look. The one from the bedroom, where I swore all he saw was me. And it frightened me. And it excited me. And it hurt and felt so fucking good all at once.

"I love you," he said, a shuddered breath in the timid evening air. Once unnerving green eyes; sharper than glass and hotter than molten iron, now trembled with uncertainty unbecoming of the typically poised bastard.

I forced a laugh, one that made him rigid, and replied, "That's an odd joke, even for you."

Beneath the wooden archway overgrown with gnarled ivy and surrounded by fragrant flowers from roses to lilies to sunflowers, Beau invaded more than my space. He shattered the confinements of my mind, crumbling barriers that once stood tall. The soft click of his sneakers against stone rumbled in my ringing ears.

Here, in a garden of cold gray fountains and sleeping flowers, Beau spoke with bated breath as if to ensnare me with words alone, "It's not a joke. *This* isn't a joke, Devin."

He kissed me. I wondered then how the hell so much changed in only 13 days.

The touch was that of a soft caress from shivering lips. A warm tongue pressed hesitantly in a silent request. A familiar sensation accompanied with familiar fear. His slim fingers danced along the skin of my neck, the other beneath the hem of my shirt. The heady scent of cinnamon washed over me in warm waves, but the taste was cool and sweet, like an icy touch of water after a blistering summer afternoon. I'd drown in him, if the fear hadn't practically perforated my gut.

"What the hell?!" I hissed, rearing away with the back of my hand against my tingling lips. "You can't just...you can't just spring that on someone. I'm not--I-I don't."

"You don't?" he whispered. "Is that your answer then?"

"Huh?"

I wasn't entirely sure why, but the idea of responding was like hot pricks to my nerves; as if each had become a string that a musician strummed to an eerie song. I searched the garden for something, anything to help drag me from this pit, but there was nothing. Only two flustered boys beneath an archway and a deep black sky of painted stars. The full moon hanging behind Beau illuminated his slumped silhouette so that I couldn't even hope the dark of the night would hide his feelings from me.

"Yes, this...t-this is my answer," I finally sputtered.

I hadn't taken a chance to see his reaction because I ran. I was only ever good at that; running.

I ran until reaching the sanctity of our room, although I imagined it wouldn't be that way for much longer once he returned. I heaved a breath that didn't quell my need for air. Uncaring of the sweat or the dirt, I slithered into bed, acting as if the covers would hide my shame. They didn't. Nothing did.

I love you.

The words were heavy. The feelings behind them even more so. It was hard to breathe. Hard to comprehend. Hard to make sense, at least at first. Then all these moments stacked up from more than this trip, from our lives spent together. Time spent bickering and laughing and kissing, maybe he really did love me and maybe he was always screaming it, hoping I'd listen or hoping it'd go away.

Beau said it himself once, he never hated me.

He loved me.

And I threw that love back in his face.

When Beau returned to the room, I had yet to fall asleep. Maybe it was minutes later. Maybe it was hours. He slid into bed, releasing a shaky breath that rattled my own chest. I should have said something. But I didn't, because cowards never changed.

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If anyone tries to belittle Devin's fears and worries, we will be forced to partake in hand to hand combat because no. Just no. People are allowed to be scared. They're allowed to be uncomfortable. They're allowed to make mistakes, and I will keep my comment section safe for those who have, are, or will one day be in a position like this so, yeah, there ya go.

Anyways, HERE IT IS! Here's the start of the story, did it go as you expected? What will happen now? Can Devin face his fears and accept their love? Or has he made his choice and this is their end?

When I went to the castle it was chilly so I just googled some pictures of the manor that showed it off more. Here's the archway and the water path!



THE END

"I can't believe it's over," said Aunt Zoey.

My gaze shifted to Beau. He sat beside me as nonchalant as when the trip began, but he couldn't hide everything. There were bags under his half lidded eyes.

"Me either, what an adventure!" Mom replied. "I'd have to say my favorite part was the beach, though."

"Agreed! Could have done without all the sand that's still in my luggage, though."

"What about you two?" Mom faced us, alternating her gaze until one of us answered.

"I liked the castle," I answered.

"Beach," said Beau. I had a hunch as to why.

"Even different in this sense," Aunt Zoey giggled. "Well, I'm glad you two enjoyed yourselves. You worked hard to get into college and we're all proud of you. Hopefully we can plan another trip like this in the future after you graduate college."

"You're putting on a lot of pressure," I teased. "I barely made it through high school."

"If you get anything lower than a B, I am going to beat your ass," Mom warned.

I raised my hands in surrender. "I wouldn't dare!"

"And when we get home make sure to unpack your things. Don't think I'll let you get away with your stuff sitting in a corner for weeks."

"Heh...ok."

Our moms faced the front, taking the brief moment of relief with them. Tension returned, tight as a high wire that threatened to snap under the pressure. The remainder of the ride, albeit shorter than the first, remained as such. I struggled to keep my balance, thinking one moment not to say a word to Beau then the next wishing to speak so many that it'd make my voice hoarse. No matter how often I looked his way, he never did the same. He concentrated on his phone or the back of his eyelids, pretending like I didn't exist, like he didn't care, although I knew it was the exact opposite.

I couldn't regret what I had done because I had made my choice. What kind of jackass would I be to go back on my word only to panic seconds later? Because that was what would happen. I would apologize. We'd kiss. Summer would end and the pressure would crush me, crumble my resolve, morph me into someone I wasn't.

Rest never took me during the drive. I was exhausted out of my mind, but my mind wouldn't even obey exhaustion. It defied the need to sleep in order to attack me with sorrow until I worried when it would ever go away. Day shifted into night and we returned to the driveway where our journey began. The humidity of Pennsylvania greeted us. Sweat pooled on my neck and tickled my brow.

Everyone stretched when they got out of the van. My gaze lingered on Beau, his arms raised above his head and arched back. Then he rolled his shoulders and turned, accidentally meeting my eyes. I froze, bottom lip caught between my teeth. He glared like the trip never happened, exactly how I claimed to have wanted. He avoided me during the unpacking then walked away without a word. I stepped forward. Only once. But ultimately watched him disappear next door.

Sighing, I grabbed my belongings and went to bed alone. My bed was cold. Too big. Too open. Too quiet. No one laid beside me breathing softly in the night. There was no warmth at my back or in my arms. I hugged a pillow, hoping it'd warm my chilled arms. Nothing worked. I tossed and turned and kicked and screamed into my pillow. I wasn't sure when I passed out but I

didn't wake until someone literally body slammed me when screaming, "He lives! Glad to see you didn't come home in a body bag!"

"You're about to leave my home in a body bag," I growled, shoving Niel off me. He yelped.

"You know, I could still be alive in that body bag. You didn't specify if you'd kill me first--"

"Shut up."

"So rude to your friends that you haven't seen in two weeks!" Niel threw a hand across his forehead. "Do you not care for me anymore?!"

"I'd argue I never did."

Niel fell onto the floor, pretending to cry into the carpet. Gwen stood over me, shaking her head. Anthony sat on the floor digging through--

"Hey! Get out of my luggage!" I shouted, tripping out of bed.

"Where are our gifts?" Anthony snickered then pouted when I pushed my suitcase away and zipped it up.

"What gifts? I didn't get you any!" I lied. All three stared wide-eyed at me.

"No gifts?" asked Gwen. "Why are we even here then?"

"That's what I'm wondering. I didn't invite any of you over!"

Niel waved his hand. "We don't need invitations."

"I just got home. I have to unpack--"

Gwen snorted. "You aren't going to unpack."

"I'm tired--"

"It's two in the afternoon," Anthony argued. "You should have been up already."

"I need new friends."

"Yeah," said Gwen, giving us all a brief look over. "Not many choices in a small place like this."

"Did she just insult all three of us at once?" Niel whispered, looking at me and Anthony. We nodded. "Damn, why you gotta do us like that?"

"You make it easy, so--" she looked at me and held out her hands. "Where are our gifts?"

"I hate all of you," I said when digging through my bag to pass their gifts around. I got a "satisfactory" from Gwen, a thumbs up from Niel and a pat on the back from Anthony. I made a mental note to set up auditions in college for their replacements, although, in the back of my mind, I knew that I needed their distraction. Cracking jokes made things easier, even if it was only avoiding the inevitable pain that would come once they were gone.

The rest of the afternoon was spent walking around town talking about my vacation, although I left out everything that happened with Beau. Anthony was the only one that gave me a knowing look at the mere mention of my so-called enemy. He wanted to ask but never did, laughing along with the stories as if he was clueless. It was almost scary how good he was at blending in. Then we stopped at the local grocery store to purchase ice cream that we ate at the park, sitting on the swings or laying in the slide.

"I can't believe you almost broke Beau's nose," Niel said then winced. "Ack, brain freeze!"

"It's your own fault for shoveling it all into your stupid face," said Gwen.

"Would have been cool if you actually saw a ghost at the manor," Anthony chimed in. My face paled at the thought. "Beau always has that damn camera. I bet he could have caught a freaky photo."

"He could just take a picture of Devin. *That* would be the most haunted photo of all!" I threw a rock at Niel for that one. He cursed then decided to be even more annoying, thankfully to someone else, by giving Gwen a wet willy like the five year old that he was.

"I'm gonna fucking gut you," Gwen growled. Niel bolted in a fit of loud screams. She was hot on his tail, leaving Anthony and I to watch in amusement from the swings. Of course, being left alone with Anthony meant--

"So what really happened with Beau?"

"I told you everything of importance about the trip."

"Ok, Mr. Warden, this ain't a work interview." Anthony rolled his eyes. "You mentioned very little of Beau. The volleyball incident and the ghost at the castle. You were together for two weeks--"

"We kissed," I admitted with an audible breath. "A lot."

Anthony coughed. The swing squeaked. I stared ahead, fearful of what he would say, how he would react.

"Does that bother you?" I asked when he didn't immediately respond.

"I sure hope not," he answered, shrugging. "I'd be bothered by myself then, if that were the case."

I whipped my head around so fast that my neck cracked. Anthony cast his gaze to the dirt he was kicking at.

"If we're being transparent... mmm, well, I uh..." He scratched the back of his neck. "I know it's naive to think my parents won't put the pieces together eventually, but I thought it'd be a little easier in college with new people, at a new life, to start going by they/them pronouns."

"Birds of a feather really do flock together," I said, smiling when Anthony laughed.

"Guess so."

"Do you want me to wait then?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to tell Niel and Gwen eventually. I honestly don't think they'll care but..."

"Doesn't make it any less scary."

"Yeah." Anthony suddenly shook their head. "Enough, back to you!"

"I was hoping you forgot."

"Not a chance!" they laughed. "How do you feel about him?"

"Huh?"

"How do you feel about Beau?" they repeated, smiling soft and kind and in no way forceful. They waited patiently, even with the possibility of this conversation coming to an abrupt end.

"I..." The words caught in my throat because no one had asked. Beau said he loved me hoping I'd reciprocate the feelings and in the moment I fucking panicked. But Anthony just asked, simple and to the point; *how do you feel about him?*

"He said that he never hated me," I mumbled, twisting my hands over the rusted chains. "He said that he loved me."

"How did you respond?"

"I threw it back in his face."

"Why?"

"Because I'm scared... scared of what will happen three months from now. Scared of screwing up our family, our friendship that only finally began along with something much more. Scared of college, of work, of life changing and moving and not having any control over it. How the hell can I

suddenly make all these huge fucking decisions when I don't fucking know anything?"

After a moment of thought, Anthony set their hand on my shoulder. "It's ok to be scared, Devin, but you're always going to be faced with what if's and change. Every day we choose a path to take without knowing the destination, it's what makes the world go round, what causes growth."

"But what if I don't want to change what we already have?"

"It's already happened, hasn't it?"

They were right. I knew they were, but I held on for as long as I could.

Anthony sighed. The swing rocked, the balls of their feet tapping the ground when they said, "You know, I think love is like standing at the edge of a cliff. You choose to leap with the fear of falling, but there is no better feeling than when you soar."

"W-Who said anything about me loving him?"

"You don't need to say it." Anthony leaned over, smirking.

"What does it matter? He's leaving, making a new life--"

"You can be a part of that new life," they interrupted. "Yeah, there's distance, but you can try to make it work before assuming that it won't. Both of you can build your lives on campus and with each other. You don't have to choose one over the other."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"There's that if again." Anthony pointed accusingly. "If, if, if, what if it does work? How about that? What if you spend the rest of your life together? What if you choose not to go after him and regret it forever?" I bit my lip, pouting when Anthony added, "Not so easy to argue against your own argument, is it?"

"I feel like you're taunting me."

"I'm not, only pointing out the flaws."

"Like I said, taunting."

Gwen and Niel finished up their battle and were heading our way. Anthony grabbed the chain of my swing, dragging me towards them. Their face was serious when they asked, "Are you going to fall, Devin? Or are you going to soar?"

"D-Do I have to answer now?"

"Every moment wasted with me is time you could be with him." Anthony let go, holding their hand to their chest with their nose in the air. "Although I think I am much better company."

I snorted. "Not when you manage to make sense."

"So you agree?"

I got up and shoved their swing so that their legs flailed about to keep balance.

"Where ya goin'?!" Anthony called, giggling.

"To jump off a fucking cliff."

"Make sure to wear a parachute!"

I gave them the finger.

As frightened as I was to admit, Anthony was right. I worried over the future that I couldn't predict. Change was inevitable. What we had already changed. Beau said it himself; he can't go back to what we were. Even I wanted change before, when our vacation started I expected us to break apart and never see each other again. I was ok with that because I didn't realize how much Beau meant to me at the time. Now that I knew the truth, I was a hypocrite, knowing we'd change no matter what and scared of what those changes entailed. Scared of all the changes happening at once and not knowing what to do.

That hadn't changed. I had no fucking clue what to say when I stepped onto Beau's porch. Uncle David answered the door with a welcoming smile. I shushed him. He raised a brow when I whispered, "Is Beau home?"

He pointed to the stairs. I gave him a thumbs up, briefly explaining, "He'd lock his door if he heard me."

Uncle David blinked then gave an understanding nod. He quietly shut the door after me. The stairs felt steeper. The hall was darker. Beau's door was daunting. My fist froze in the air. My mind went numb when hearing the quiet music within. There was meant to be a grand speech and apology, but no words were filtering through. There was only fear, the same fear Anthony spoke of. The jump was the hardest part, the moment when you looked down. I was looking down.

Then I knocked.

"What?" Beau asked with the soft tone he hadn't used with me since my moment of stupidity. He didn't expect me to open the door, which was shown in his wide eyes as he sat in front of his computer. His camera was hooked up, photos of our trip on the computer screen.

"Hey," I whispered.

Beau's knuckles whitened on the back of his chair. "Get out."

"I-I wanted to talk."

"Get. Out."

I shut the door. He stood, shoulders stiff and hands fisted. His glare burned like it had never done before. We fought for years. Threw harsh words, even harsher glares, but this was a whole other level. I saw the pain of rejection, the desperation for me to leave, even a moment when he bit his lip, turned his head almost pleadingly then hardened his gaze. I had caused that.

"I know you're upset. You have every right to be," I said.

"If you know then why are you here?"

"Because I'm an idiot."

"Why the hell are you doing this?" Beau pinched the bridge of his nose. "I already told you, I can't go back--"

"I can't either, and I don't want to!"

His brows furrowed in obvious confusion. When I approached him, he took a step back, knocking against the desk.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Beau. I can't stop thinking about how everything between us can go horribly wrong without even considering the possibility that it can go unbelievably great too."

"What are you saying?" he whispered.

"I'm saying that I made a terrible mistake, quite a few of them, honestly. I shouldn't have expected us to go back to normal. I knew change was inevitable but clung to what I could as long as I could and hurt you in the process.. I shouldn't have thrown your feelings back in your face so I-I understand if you, uh, if you don't want to try again or try at all. I, um--" I twisted my hands together, searching for words that never came. "Like I said, I-I don't want what we used to have. I want what we have now, or uh... what we started over vacation?"

Beau listened quietly. Did he understand what I was saying?

"I know it will be tough with you so far away. Nothing with us is ever easy, is it?" I forced a chuckle. "I know that you'll start something new there, but we can start something new too, right? Even if we aren't right next to one another, we can begin our own journey. We don't have to choose one or the other! What, uh, what I'm saying is I don't know what's going to happen, but I'd like to find out and, again, I'm really so--"

"Devin."

"H-Huh?"

"Shut the fuck up." He kissed me.

I was pulled into a familiar warm embrace, one I had been yearning for. I held fast, as if I thought he'd slip away. In each other's arms like this, we returned to the gardens, kissing under the moon, how it should have ended, where we really should have begun. But I'd take this too, a sloppy kiss in Beau's bedroom with memories of our vacation on his computer screen. The scent of his cologne and the heated touch of his fingers over the back of his neck.

"I'm still angry with you," he whispered, kissing me again.

"Sorry. I'll make it up to you."

"And how are you gonna do that?"

"I'll kiss you until you're sick of me."

Beau chuckled against my lips. "I think that's the opposite of what you want."

"It's a riddle, because you'll never be sick of me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep!" I pulled Beau close, resting my face in the crook of his neck. His skin broke out with goosebumps. "I can't promise I won't worry in the future, in fact, I promise that I will, but we'll figure out together, right?"

"Right, although I'll probably do all the work."

"Probably."

He pulled away, peering up at me with a sudden glare that was nothing like earlier. It was almost teasing when he said, "I'm still waiting to hear it though."

"Hear what?"

"How you feel about me, in words. Not a speech."

"I...uh...t-that..."

He was backing me into a corner, figuratively and literally as he kept pushing me. Ok, so it wasn't a corner as I soon discovered when my legs hit his mattress. I fell into the pillows, cheeks burning up when Beau leaned over me and repeated, "How do you feel about me, Devin?"

Although I knew, saying it out loud was like an oath, an oath I was willing to give if it meant continuing what we had over a life changing vacation.

"I love you," I said, smirking at Beau's wide eyes so I said it again, enjoying how he went red up to his ears. "I love you, Beau."

He smiled. "I love you too."

We kissed, a promise that both the good and the bad of our 14 days would become many, many more.

~THE END~

That's right, this is the end! No, I did not plan for it to be 14 chapters xD I thought 16 or 17, but I cut a few things because I felt the story was dragging on. I also decided to end it here rather than have a chapter of everyone figuring out since I feel this is good. Devin and Beau don't know what the future holds for them, but they're together and the story ends with a promise that they're going to try. I feel it's a sweet and simple ending that lets you guys determine for yourselves :) I hope you enjoyed the story! If you have any questions for the Q&A, leave them below. I had fun reliving my vacation through these two dorks and I hope you had fun following them on their journey!

Q&A

Devin Ward

Age: 18

Beau Young

Age: 18

Where do YOU see Devin and Beau's journey taking them?

These questions are complicated because the realist in me says to answer honestly; they broke up. But the romantic in me wants to scream that they live happily ever after. I don't really know, but if I sit and think about it, I think they'd break up once or twice during their long distance relationship, but ultimately get back together and stay together. It'd be a bumpy road, but with everything they've gone through, I think they'll pull through.

Did the long distance relationship work? Where are they now?

Like I said above, they work out. Once Beau is done with college he'll come back home. I think they'd both move to a more city-like area though, some place where they're more accepted or feel more comfortable.

Have the moms already guessed what's going on between their sons?

Ooooh, I will do my best not to go into lecturing mode since I know this is meant as an innocent question lol However! Parents definitely shouldn't make assumptions about their children, especially pertaining to gender identities or sexuality. These are topics that people need to figure out and, even with absolutely loving and supportive parents, it can be terrifying and incredibly hard to deal with. Long story short, their parents (not just their mom's) are aware that *something* is changing between Beau and Devin, what it is, they are not sure and they will not assume. None of them will pressure their kids to talk, only wait and support them should the time come when they are ready to talk.

How did telling their parents go?

They're happy and slightly concerned. They live in a small town where their sons may not be as accepted, but as long as Beau and Devin are safe and happy, then they're happy too!

Has Devin remained in touch with Anthony through the years given their revelation to Devin in the park?

I think they'd keep in touch as the years went on, but life happens so they probably wouldn't be as close as they were as teenagers.

How did Devin's other friends take to the news of Devin being demisexual and Anthony being non-binary?

Gwen and Niel would be fine with it. Niel would probably need more explaining since he definitely has no idea what demisexual is or fully understands what it is to be non-binary, but he'd respect it and learn as time went by. Gwen is laidback so she'd probably just say "cool," and act like usual lol

Does Anthony change their name?

No.

When did Beau first realize his feelings for Devin?

Puberty lol Beau has always had a crush on Devin, that's why he's always taken care of him even when they argued. As they got older, Beau's feelings only grew. I tried to hint that Beau and his boyfriend broke up because of Devin by Beau simply stating "we didn't work out." They didn't work out because Beau's always liked someone else; Devin.

Will there be a chapter from Beau's P.O.V.?

Nope.

How did you come up with the idea for this story?

I've mentioned a few times before that this story is based on my vacation, so there's that lol All the places they visited, I visited on my vacation (pre-COVID, obviously.) As for Beau and Devin, I just wanted some enemies to lovers again and I went from there.

Which was your favorite chapter to write? And was it the easiest or the most complicated?

The first kiss scene at the bunker by the sea! Oh my god, I was dyyyyyyyyying to write that. Usually the chapters I like most are the hardest to write since I want it to be perfect! I don't know why, but I was super proud as soon as I wrote it and loved that moment of vulnerability and silent admission between the boys ^^

Will you ever make another chapter showing us where they are and how they're doing?

Nah, that kind of goes against the whole ending lol it's open ended so you can envision their future however you wish.

How do you plan out your characters? How did you get the idea for Devin and Beau?

Honestly, there wasn't a lot of planning for this story. Since it was based on my vacation, I already had all the spots picked and I knew I wanted enemies to lovers. All I really had written about them was their names, ages, and some interests, like Beau and photography and Devin being a bit of a scatter brain. The details about them came as I wrote and I just made notes to remember later. This time around, there wasn't anything special since it was a spontaneous decision to write and a short story lol

You write many romance stories, how do you manage to avoid writing the same kind of characters? What's your strategy to come up with new personalities and such?

For longer and more thought out stories, I make detailed character sheets by asking myself questions about them. What is their backstory? What is their goal? What are their fears? How do they shape the character's personality?

Our personalities are formed through many different aspects of our lives; our parents, our environment, our peers, our experiences, etc. We react differently to them, so based on all that and our reactions, how does this make a character? Why did they go this route in life? Stuff like that!

Can you tell us something about your new projects?

Hmm, I can't say too much since they're still in the works. However, I hope to have a Tapas premium novel coming out sometime in February (possibly sooner, fingers crossed!) It will be a romantic fantasy and, some may not be happy with this but whatever, it's straight romance. Will there be queer characters? Obviously lol But I hope you guys will give it a try when it releases. It has been so much fun to write so I can't wait for everyone to finally read it ^_^

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Finishing a story is always bittersweet, but I had a lot of fun with 14 Days and feel that it has wrapped up well. I hope all of you enjoyed the journey as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thanks for sticking with me through the years. Thanks for reading my stories. Thanks for the support, and I hope you enjoy my future work!

Here's a list of my other stories, make sure to check them out! ^^

Ongoing Free to Read Novel:

The Lonely Ones

Completed Free to Read Novels:

He Who Will Be King
Invisible Boy
What Makes a Monster
Dear Caleb
Fools in Love
-K

Ongoing Paid Novels Available on the tapas app or tapas.io:

Save the Demon King
Reborn as the Villain's Lackey

Completed Paid Novels Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth
Riddle Me This
Whisper Woods
The Not So Super Hero
The Antidote to Doubt

Ongoing Comic Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth (adapted from the novel)

If you wanna stalk me on other sites, here ya go;

Tapas: Twoony
Twitter: Tw00ny
Instagram: (personal) tw00ny
(author/reading): twoonyreads
Patreon: Twoony

Since I post early chapters there and some had sex scenes, my account is marked 18+ so you can't search it. You have to use link I left below or simply type in www.patreon.com/Twoony

Thanks again for reading!